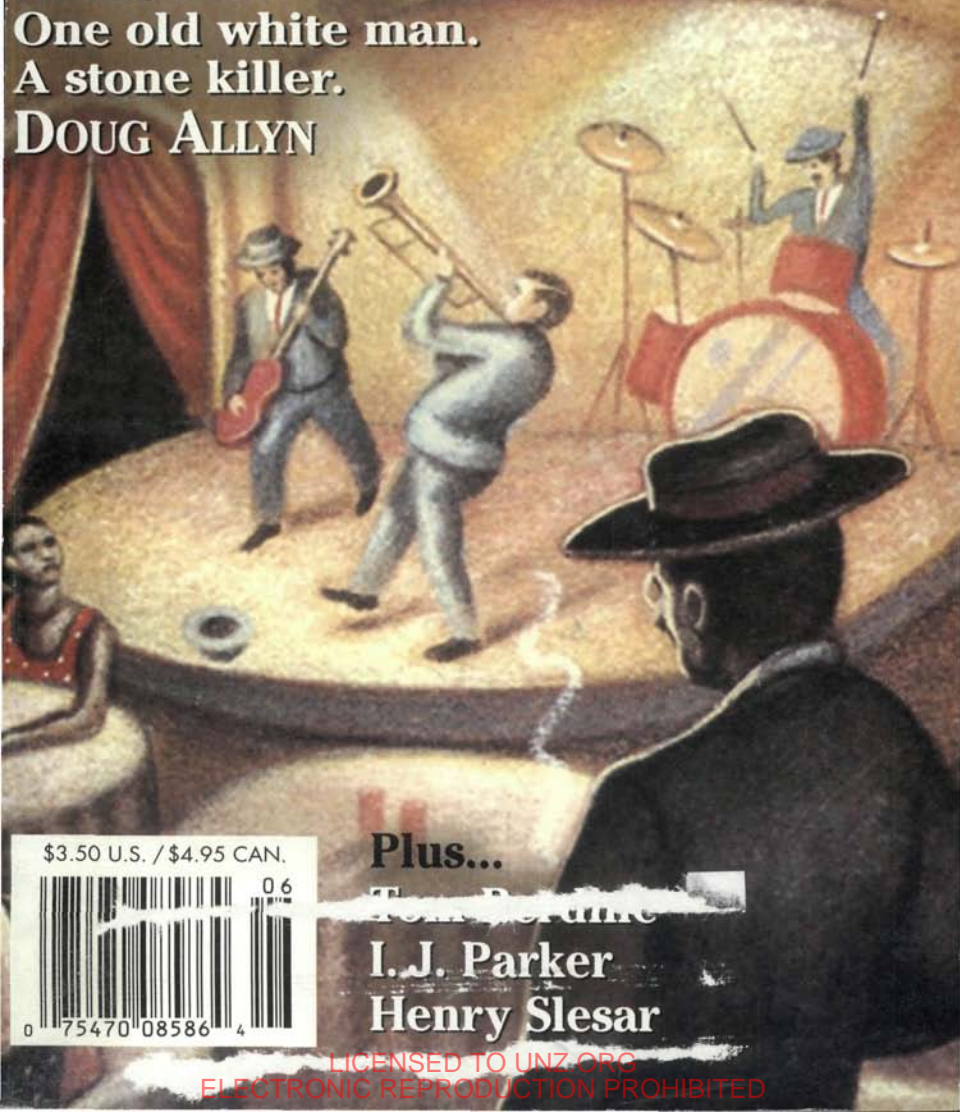


ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S **Mystery** JUNE 2002 **MAGAZINE**

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A stone killer.
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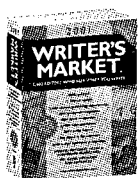
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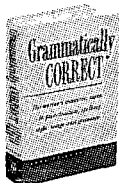
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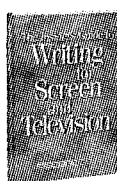
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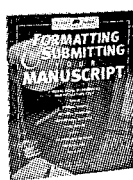
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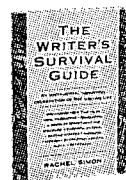
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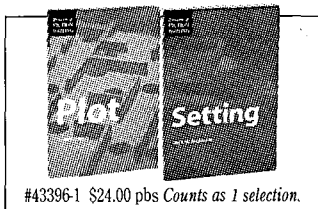
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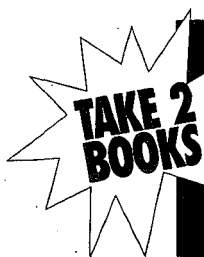
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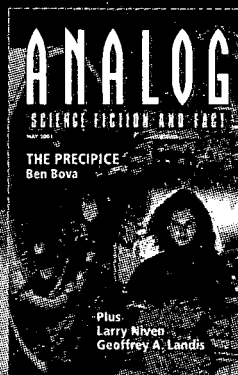
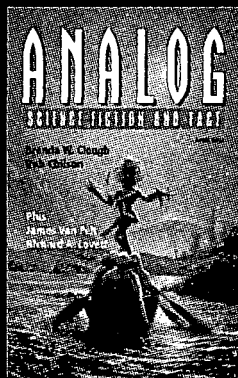
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EDITOR'S NOTES

From the Staff of AHMM



It is our pleasure to
announce that AHMM editor

CATHLEEN JORDAN

has been elected to be a 2002 recipient of the
Mystery Writers of America's prestigious Ellery Queen Award.
The award was established in 1983 to honor outstanding
people in the mystery publishing industry.

The staff of AHMM joins with the
Mystery Writers of America
in saluting a great editor!

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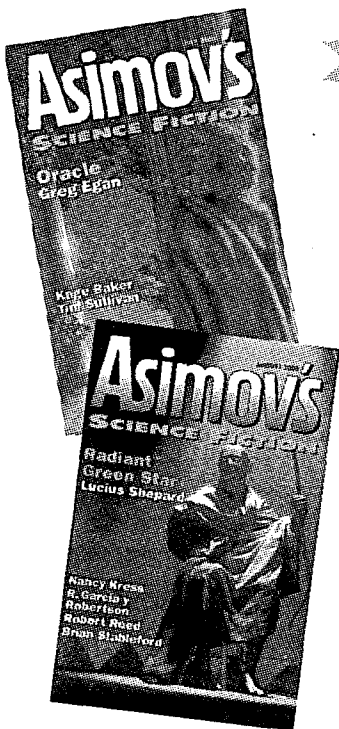
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FICTION

THE JUKEBOX KING

Doug Allyn

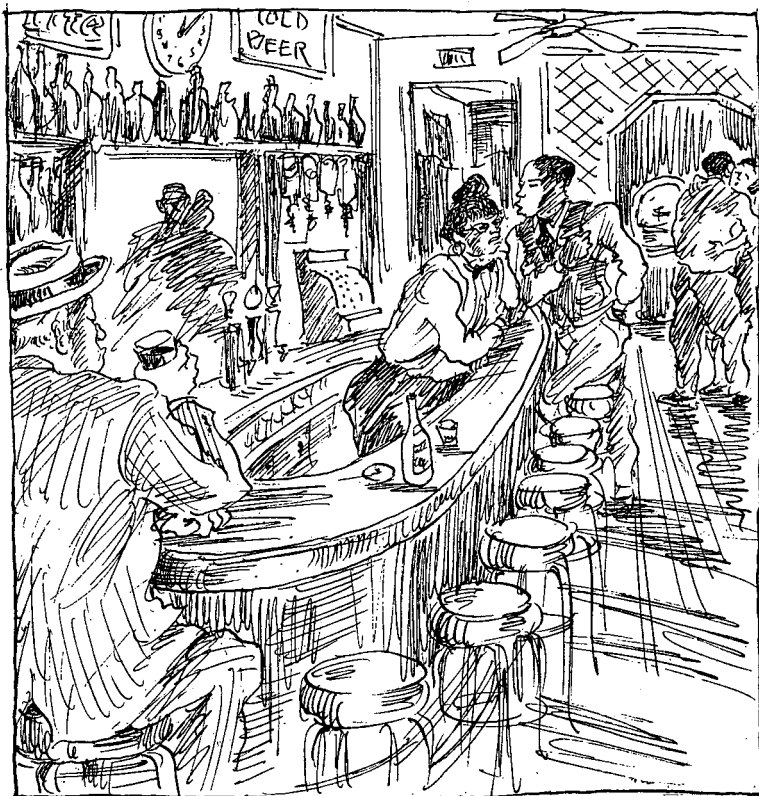


Illustration by Hank Blaustein

Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 6/02

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August, 1960. Worst heat wave since '43. The year of the riots.

No clouds. The sun cruising a sheet-metal sky, scorching Detroit's mean streets all day long, hammering the heat down to the ancient salt mines beneath the city.

By noon the auto plants were like ovens. People said the temperature at Ford Rouge hit a hundred and thirty up near the steel ceilings. Overhead crane operators had to rotate down to the factory floor every half hour, panting like dogs, their clothes soaked.

Welders were working half blind, squinting through steamy visors, torches slippery with grease and sweat. And the painters in the infrared booths? Hell on earth.

But the assembly lines never stopped. Never even slowed down.

Nightfall brought no relief. Black tar bubbling in the streets and alleys like grease on a griddle, black folks boiling out of their tenements and rowhouses. Restless and surly. And thirsty. Very thirsty.

Brownie's Lounge on Dequinder was buzzing by seven, jammed tight by ten. Selling Stroh's beer by the gallon. Straight up. No glasses. Shop rats guzzling the brew out of the pitchers. Getting high, feeling mighty. Ready to hear some blues.

John Lee Hooker's trio came on at nine, kicking out jams on Brownie's postage-stamp dance floor. Big John wailing on his old Harmony guitar, James Cotton on harmonica, and a pickup bass player.

No drummer. No need for one. If you can't feel the beat when John Lee stomps his size thirteen Flor-

sheims on a hardwood dance floor, you'd best lie down. You might be dead.

Around midnight the crowd finally started to thin. Working men had to be up at four. Making Thunderbirds, making Fairlanes, making that overtime pay. The best way for a blue-collar black man to rise in this life. The UAW saved the crap jobs for blacks, but the bosses didn't care if a man worked double shifts for time-and-a-half. Turning out Fords for Cadillac money.

By one forty A.M. Brownie's Lounge was down to a die-hard handful of customers.

Four white kids, blues fans from the University of Detroit, applauding wildly as John Lee closed his show with Smokestack Lightning.

A few couples still grinding each other on the dance floor, ignoring the beat, rocking to a rhythm of their hearts and loins. Hot to trot.

A few hookers gabbing near the door, too whipped to stroll the Cass Corridor for trade.

And at the bar? One old white man. A stone killer.

Moishe Abrams had wandered in a little after one, parked his wide ass on a stool at the end of the bar, his back to the wall.

Brownie spotted him instantly. Hard to miss Moishe. Most of Brownie's regulars were black or beige, plus a few white hipsters. Blue-collar. Or no collar.

But Moishe? A surly old white dude with coarse features. Built like a cement block, squat, square,

and hard. Old-timey gray suit, wide tie, porkpie brim. Still dressing like swing was the thing.

But nobody ever joked about Moishe Abrams' clothes. Not to his face. Not even behind his back.

Carolina was working the counter. A big woman, milk chocolate skin, a smile wide as a grand piano. She dressed like a man: tuxedo blouse, bow tie, and slacks. But nobody ever mistook her for one.

Brownie stood in the shadows of his office doorway, keeping an eye on Moishe. Watched him guzzle his first drink, then knock back another just as quick.

When Moishe swiveled on his stool to watch the band, Brownie motioned Carolina over to the wait-res station. Leaned in close to her, keeping his voice low.

"The white dude at the end of the bar? He drinks free. On the house."

"You sure?" Carolina frowned. "He's already pig-drunk and he's throwin' down bourbon like Tennessee's on fire."

"I don't care. Give him whatever he wants, no charge. And say yessir, nossir. He likes that."

"Fine by me, long as he knows I'm not on the menu. Who is he, anyway?"

"He's the local jukebox king," Brownie said.

"King? You mean he's some kind of singer?"

"No." Brownie smiled. A good smile. "Moishe's people own the jukeboxes. All of 'em. In every joint in Detroit. And the cigarette machines and the candy machines and even the damn slot machines in the

blind pigs. They also own pieces of half the bars in Motown including mine. You get my drift?"

"He's mobbed up? That old dude?"

"Moishe damn near is the Mob. Used to be muscle for the Purple Gang during Prohibition. Ran whisky in from Canada, drove trucks right across the ice on the Detroit River in wintertime."

"Must've been crazy," Carolina said, glancing sidelong at Moishe. Curious now.

"Oh, he's still crazy. Only nowadays he collects vending machine money and the vig for loan sharks. When Moishe comes round, you'd best have his bread ready. Slow-pays get stomped. Or just disappear. So, you make nice with Moishe, sugar. While I figure a way to get his honky ass out of here."

"Got it covered," Carolina nodded, sauntering down to sweeten Moishe's drink with her wide smile. Leaving Brownie to worry. And wrestle with his conscience. Because he hadn't told Carolina everything.

Sometimes Moishe Abrams killed people. Just for the hell of it.

Brownie saw Moishe cut a guy in a blind pig once, five, six years before. Bled the poor bastard out on a barroom floor over some stupid argument. Over nothing, really. On a hot summer night. A lot like this one.

Brownie was only a bartender then. Hired help.

He mopped up the blood, then helped the owner load the stiff into the trunk of the dead man's '54 Lincoln. They left the car in an al-

ley off Twelfth. Keys in the ignition.

End of story. A black man knifed to death on the Corridor? Do tell.

But that was then. Brownie wasn't a bartender any more. The Lounge was his place, and these were his customers, his people.

Which made Moishe his problem. The trouble was, he still remembered the look on the old man's face, sitting at the bar calmly ordering another drink with a dead guy on the floor a few feet away.

He looked . . . no, that was the thing. Moishe didn't have a look. Empty eyes. Nobody home. He'd killed that dude like it was nothing. Maybe because he was black. Or maybe just because.

Leo Brown—Brownie to his friends and everybody else—was no coward. Running a blues joint on Detroit's Cass Corridor, trouble just naturally came with the territory. Drunks, brawlers. He'd even faced down a stickup man once.

But Moishe? Down deep, where it mattered, Brownie was afraid of Moishe Abrams. Scared spitless.

He didn't like the feeling. Didn't like feeling small. Especially since he had an easy answer. The gun in his office. A Colt Commander, .45 auto. Nickel-plated. Loaded.

He thought about getting it, jacking in a round, walking up to Moishe, blowing his freakin' brains all over the wall without saying a damn word to him. Solve the problem that way.

Permanent.

He liked the idea, the simplicity of it. The courage it would take. But

he knew it wouldn't end anything. It would only bring on more trouble. Which made it a dumb move. And despite his easy drawl and laid-back style, Brownie was no fool. In some ways, he was an educated man. He owned books and read them. Didn't have much formal schooling but he listened to people. All kinds of people. And he remembered what they said. And learned from it.

But he'd never heard an easy way to manage Moishe Abrams. The old mobster was about as predictable as a weasel on amphetamines.

So Brownie took a deep breath and forced down his fear. Slipping off his tailored jacket, he hung it on the hook beside his office door. Wondering if he'd ever put it on again. Then he strolled casually over to Moishe.

And smiled.

"Mr. Abrams, how you doin' tonight?"

Moishe didn't look up. "Get lost, blood."

"You remember me, Mr. Abrams. Brownie? This is my place. Can I buy you one for the road? We're gettin' ready to close."

"It's early."

"Nossir, it's almost two. Word is, beat cops are checkin' up and down the Corridor. Writin' tickets for after hours."

"No beat cops are gonna roust me."

"Hell, I'm not worried about you, Mr. Abrams. More worried about them. You bust 'em up in my place, it's bad for business. Mine *and* yours."

Moishe glanced up at Brownie, looking him over for the first time. Tall, dark, and slender. Even features, liquid brown eyes, wide shoulders. Well dressed. Soft-spoken. "You tryin' to give me the bum's rush, Brownie?"

"Nossir, no way. Couldn't if I wanted to, and we both know that. Now, how about that drink?"

"I'll take the drink, but I ain't leavin'. I'm stuck. My damn Caddy overheated, and I'll never get a cab this part of town, this time of night."

"No problem," Brownie said. "I'll drive you home." And instantly regretted it. "My car's outside, it'd be my pleasure."

Moishe considered the offer. "What kind of a car?"

"'Sixty Studebaker Hawk. Emerald green. Brand spankin' new."

"Hawks are pimp cars," Moishe grunted, knocking back the last of his bourbon in a gulp. "Beats walkin', though. Let's go."

Grabbing his jacket from his office, Brownie thought again about the gun in his desk. Decided against it.

If Moishe spotted the piece, Brownie'd have to use it or lose it. Mix it up with a pro like Moishe? Might as well jump in the ring with Joe Louis, try to land a lucky punch.

Brownie's Stude hummed to life, rumbling like a caged cat. After a few blocks, the radio warmed up, WCHB, Inkster. Long Lean Larry Dean murmuring between soul tunes in his silky baritone.

Moishe switched it off. Glancing over his shoulder, he checked the road behind him, his eyes flicking

back and forth like bugs in a bonfire. Paranoid. The price of being a prick.

Neither man spoke, Moishe stewing in his sour, boozy silence, Brownie not about to make conversation. Be like gabbing with a gut-shot bear.

"Stop," Moishe said suddenly. "Pull over here."

Surprised, Brownie eased the Studebaker to the curb. Moishe lived out in Grosse Pointe, a good five miles farther on. Here they were only a few blocks from downtown in the dead of night. Empty streets, eyeless windows.

Moishe climbed out. "Take off," he said, slamming the door.

"You're very welcome, Massa Abrams," Brownie said. But very quietly. To himself.

As he circled the block to head back to the lounge, a car suddenly gunned out of an alley, pulling up right on his tail, staying just a few feet behind his rear bumper.

Prowl car. City cops. But they didn't turn on their gumball flasher. Hit him with the spotlight instead, checking out his car.

Half blinded by the blaze, Brownie braced himself for the roust, wondering if they wanted grease money or just to bust his balls. Black man, new car. Must be up to no good, right?

Or maybe not. For whatever reason, they didn't pull him over. Just tailed him for half a mile with their spotlight glaring through the Stude's rear window, reminding Brownie he was the wrong color, wrong part of Detroit, wrong time of night.

Like he needed reminding.

The sweet scent of coffee woke him. The rich aroma dragging him back from the land of dreams. Brownie opened his eyes. Blinked. Breathed deep.

Black coffee. Fresh. His bedroom door opened a crack, and Carolina stuck her head in.

"Brownie? You awake?"

"I am now. What time is it? And how'd you get in here?"

"It's a little after noon. I showed up for work, Eddie gave me a key, said to get my young butt over here, get you up. Couldn't call you. Didn't want to talk over the phone."

"Why not?" Brownie asked, snapping fully awake. "What's wrong?"

"That old guy you left with last night? He's dead, Brownie."

"What do you mean dead? Dead how?"

"How you think? Somebody did him in."

Brownie shook his head, trying to clear it. Felt like a fighter who'd walked into a sucker punch. He remembered wanting to pop Moishe bad, even thinking about the gun in his office.

For a split second he wondered—no. He'd dropped Moishe off downtown. Alive and well. Maybe a little drunk. Or a lot drunk. With Moishe it was hard to tell.

"What the hell happened to him? Exactly."

"Hey, don't bark at me. I don't know anything about all this. I just tend bar, okay?"

There was something in her tone. He glanced at her sharply.

"Whoa up. You don't think I iced the old dude, do you?"

Her hesitation said more than the shake of her head.

"No, of course I don't think that. I got coffee on. You want some?"

"Yeah. There's Canadian bacon in the icebox. Better fry us up some eggs, too. It's liable to be a long day."

He showered quickly, chose a dark blue Sunday-go-to-meetin' suit from his closet. The jacket fit a little loose in the shoulders. Room enough for a .45 auto in a shoulder holster. Too bad the gun was still in his desk back at the Lounge.

But it was all for the best.

When Brownie stepped into the lounge, two men immediately rose from their barstools. Both of 'em wearing off-the-rack suits from Sears Roebuck. One white guy, one black. Cops.

"Leo Brown?" the white cop asked. The black cop didn't ask Brownie anything, just pointed at the wall.

Brownie raised his hands as the black cop patted him down for weapons, found nothing, then spun him around. He was a big fellow, half a head taller than Brownie, probably outweighed him by a hundred pounds. Sad, deeply lined face. Like a blue-tick hound.

The white cop was smaller, freckled, maybe forty. Whitey showed Brownie an I.D. Gerald Doyle. Lieutenant. Doyle did the talking.

"Tell us about last night, Leo. What happened between you and Moishe Abrams? Did he start trouble in here?"

"There was no trouble," Brownie

said, straightening his lapels. "Moishe came in about one, had a few, hung around till closing. Couldn't get a cab, so I gave him a lift uptown."

"To what address?"

"No address. He got off at a corner, Clairmont and Twelfth."

"Twelfth Street? *That* time of night?" the black cop said skeptically.

"You guys know who Moishe was, right?"

"We know," Doyle nodded. "So?"

"So you know he could get off any damn place he wanted in this town, any time at all."

"Maybe," Doyle conceded. "I hear he had a piece of this joint. That so?"

"Moishe was the jukebox king. Worked for the people who own the jukeboxes and cigarette machines."

"We know who he worked for," Doyle said mildly. "But that isn't what I asked you, Mr. Brown. Did Moishe own a piece of this place?"

"Not exactly."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"What bank do you use, lieutenant?" Brownie asked.

"Me? Detroit National. Why?"

"Five years ago I was a bartender. Had about ten grand saved, needed a loan to buy this place, fix it up. Where do you figure I got the money? Detroit National?"

"I guess not," Doyle said, smiling in spite of himself. "So what went wrong last night, Brownie? You a little late payin' Moishe the vigorous?"

"I told you what happened. Nothing. I mean, look at me," Brownie said, turning right and left, show-

ing both profiles. "Do I look like I been alley dancin' with Moishe Abrams?"

The two cops exchanged a look; then the white cop shrugged. "Maybe not, Leo, but you left here with him. Which makes you the last one to see him alive."

"No way. It was around two when I dropped him off. A prowler car pulled out of an alley on Clairmont, tailed me a dozen blocks or so to make sure I got out of the neighborhood. Check with them."

"We will. But even if that holds up it won't get you off the hook, Brownie. If you know anything—"

"All I know is, Moishe was half in the bag, and he was a mean drunk. Mean sober, for that matter. And it was a hot night. I'm not surprised somebody got killed, I'm just surprised it was Moishe. What happened to him anyway?"

"Cut," the black cop said, bass voice like coal rumbling down a chute. "Somebody opened him up. Sending a message, most likely."

"What message?"

"Move over," Doyle said. "Moishe was mobbed up with the Motown Syndicate, the old Purple Gang. I hear there's a new bunch crowding them. Sicilians from Chicago. Which means you're in a world of trouble, Brownie."

"Why me? I don't know a damn thing about this."

"You're still in the middle, like it or not. And if the Sicilians whacked Moishe to send a message, who do you think the Motown mob is gonna use to send one back?"

"Have them Italians been around to see you?" the black cop asked.

"I've heard they leaned on some people in the neighborhood," Brownie admitted. "Haven't gotten around to me."

"They will. When they do, you better call us, hear? Maybe we can help you out."

"Talk to y'all about mob business?" Brownie smiled. "Yeah, right. Why don't you just shoot me in the head right now?"

"Maybe we should," the black cop smiled, a wolf's grin that never reached his eyes. "Might be doin' you a kindness."

"We've wasted enough time on this moke," Doyle shrugged. "We got two more homicides to check out before lunch. One of 'em might interest you, Brownie. A guy got himself beaten to death a few blocks down on Dequinder last night. Makes you wonder who was mad at him, doesn't it?"

"Nobody had to be mad at nobody, lieutenant. It was a hot night. People get edgy."

"Want to take a ride with us, take a look at your future?"

"No, thanks," Brownie said, shaking his head. "I'm doin' fine right here."

"So far, you mean," the black cop snorted. "You ever hire blues singers?"

"Blues is what I do. Uptown places get the names, Jackie Wilson, Sam Cooke. The blues suits this neighborhood a little better. Local folks like it."

"Ever book Jimmy Reed?"

"Can't afford him. He's The Big Boss Man."

"Too bad. Ol' Jimmy does a tune that oughtta be your theme song.

'Better Take Out Some Insurance.' In your situation you're gonna need it. *Big* time. I'll see you around, Brownie. Hope you're still breathin' when I do."

After the law left, Brownie stepped into his office and closed the door. Didn't turn on the light. Stood there in the darkness trying to make sense of what the two cops had said.

Some dude stomped to death on the Corridor? No news. Happened about three times a week.

Moishe murdered a few blocks from where Brownie dropped him off? Damned hard to believe. Partly because the old man seemed invincible. Partly because it was too good to be true.

The white cop had one thing right, though. With trouble brewing between the mobs, the middle was a bad place to be. Might as well sack out on the Woodward centerline at rush hour.

Switching on the lights, he opened his top desk drawer. Eyed the nickel-plated .45 Colt Commander a moment, then closed the drawer again, leaving the gun where it was.

Truth was, he didn't like guns much. Kept the .45 strictly for show. But one crummy pistol wouldn't impress the Syndicate or the Sicilians either. They had plenty of guns of their own.

Three Motown Syndicate hoods showed up an hour later, shouldering into the club's dimness out of the afternoon heat.

He knew who they were, sort of. Tony Zeman, Jr., was royalty. Son of Big Tony Zee. Tony Senior was a Motown mob boss when Capone was still a bouncer. He was in a wheelchair now, people said. Lost a leg. Diabetes. Life whittling him away. Maybe as a payback for the way his goons carved up other people.

Tony Junior looked more like a preppie than a hood. Short, sandy hair, pasty face. Suit from Hughes and Hatcher. Wingtips. Buffed nails. Brownie had heard Junior was in law school. Which would make him more dangerous than his daddy ever was.

His bodyguard was a pushy little fireplug of an Irishman everybody called Red. Fire-haired, pasty-faced, bad-tempered. Risky business to be around.

Brownie didn't know the third guy at all, Spanish-looking dude in a gray suit. Pocked face.

"Mr. Zeman," Brownie nodded, not bothering to offer his hand. "How you doin'? You want to talk in my office?"

"Forget it. We'll sit here," Red said sharply, marching to the end of the bar where he could watch the door. Moishe's favorite spot. Even took the same damn stool.

Brownie told Carolina to take off, took her place behind the bar, shedding his jacket so Red could see he wasn't armed.

"Would you gentlemen care for a taste?"

"We're not here to drink, Mr. Brown," Junior said. "You've got exactly five seconds to tell me what happened to my uncle."

"Didn't know Moishe was your uncle," Brownie said. "Sorry for your loss. But that's really all I know. He came in 'round one, had a few drinks. I offered him a ride home, dropped him off downtown. At Twelfth and Clairmont."

"You dumped him there?" Red butted in. "By himself?"

"Moishe told me to get lost, so I got," Brownie shrugged. "A prowler car tailed me out of the neighborhood, but I expect y'all know that already, since you've got more lines into Detroit P.D. than Michigan Bell."

"Did you see anybody hanging around when you dropped him off?" Junior asked.

"Nope. Not that time of night. And nobody followed us."

"How do you know that?" Red asked.

"I don't, but Moishe did. He checked. About a dozen times."

"Like he was nervous?" Red pressed. "Expecting trouble?"

"More like he was bein' Moishe. He was a careful man."

"Not careful enough," Tony Junior said, looking Leo over. Reading him. "Have any strangers been around to talk to you, Leo? Maybe about changing jukebox companies?"

"No. Maybe they're saving me for last."

"So you know who they are?"

"I've heard they're Italians from Chicago. Serious people. But it doesn't matter. Y'all fronted me the money when I needed it, Mr. Zeman. I'm not forgetting that."

"Glad to hear it," Junior said, leaning in. "Just so you know—I

may be taking over the jukebox business. My uncle was . . . a good businessman. But he was old fashioned. I've got new ideas. For instance, you should make some changes, Brownie. Get with the times."

"What kind of changes?"

"For openers, lose the blues on your jukebox. Put on new music. Run some beer specials, hire some rock bands from the college, get a younger crowd in here. Put in some girls upstairs. You're sitting on a gold mine here, Leo. Together we could turn it into a real money-maker."

"I like it the way it is," Leo said evenly. "I don't get rich, but I make my payments on time. And that's all you've got to worry about, mister. This is a neighborhood joint. Local people come in to hear some blues, forget about life awhile. White kids and hookers would bring trouble, and I don't like trouble. The big bucks won't mean much if I have to blow it all on bail."

"Maybe you didn't hear what the man said," Red said, doing a movie version of a badass stare. "You hard of hearing, blood?"

"I hear just fine," Leo said, ignoring Red. "The thing is, my uncle's alive and well and livin' in Alabama. Yours is downtown coolin' on a slab, Mr. Zeman."

"Are you trying to threaten me, Brownie?"

"No, sir. I'm just sayin' maybe you don't understand how things work down here. If I was you, I'd be a lot more worried about who waxed Moishe than tunes on a jukebox. It's the kind of thing you have to be

sure about. Especially since a whole lot of people could get killed for nothing if you're wrong."

"We know who killed Moishe," Red said. "Them Italians."

"No," Leo said, shaking his head slowly. "I don't think so."

"Why not?"

"If the Italians took him out, they'd put it all over town so everybody'd know how bad they are. But I haven't heard anything about it one way or the other. How about you? You hear any noise about Moishe gettin' waxed? Like who did it? Or why?"

"No," Tony Junior admitted. "We've talked to a few people. Leaned on a few more. Nobody knows anything. Including you."

"I don't know who killed Moishe, but I might have better luck finding out than you will."

"How do you mean?"

"This is my part of town, Mr. Zeman. I know who to ask, how to ask. People will talk to me who won't talk to you, you know?"

"Why be helpful?" Red sneered. "What's in it for you?"

"Stayin' alive, for one thing. If you start up with those Italians, I'm liable to get caught in the crossfire. On the other hand, if I can turn up the guy who did Moishe, it oughtta be worth something, right?"

"It might be," Tony Junior nodded warily. "Like how much?"

"We just call it even. My loan's paid off. Sound fair?"

"Not quite," Junior said. "My dad taught me any deal should cut both ways. Something to win. And something to lose. So you've got twenty-

four hours, Brownie. After that we start taking people out. With you at the top of the list."

"Me? Wait a minute, I didn't—"

"Save it, Brownie. You're right, I don't know how things are down here. And I don't care. Maybe you people think I'm too young to take over from my uncle. Too green. Maybe you even think you can con me. Is that how it is?"

"No, I—"

"Shut up! And listen up! You've got one day to give me the guy who did Moishe. Or you're the guy. You got that? Or should I have Red take you out in the alley and explain it some more?"

"No need," Brownie said, swallowing. "I got it."

Brownie didn't waste any time. Five minutes after Tony Junior and his goons left, he was in his emerald Studebaker retracing the route he'd taken with Moishe the night before. From the club to the corner of Clairmont and Twelfth.

Easing the Stude to the curb, he scanned the area, remembering. Moishe hadn't asked to be brought here. He'd spoken suddenly when he ordered Brownie to pull over.

As though he'd forgotten something. Or remembered it. Okay. What could Moishe remember about this corner?

A newsstand in the next block carried the morning papers, the *Detroit Free Press*, the *News*, a few magazines. But it hadn't been open yet. Hell, it was after two A.M. Every damn thing was closed . . .

No. Not everything. Brownie

parked the Hawk at the curb and climbed out. The steamy afternoon hit him like a blast from a furnace door. Instant sweat.

Dropping a dime in the meter for an hour, he strolled down the narrow service alley that led to the loading docks in the middle of the block behind the shops.

There. A wooden staircase led to a second story warehouse above a print shop. No lights showing. Naturally. The windows were painted flat black. Trotting up the steps, Brownie rapped twice on the gray metal freight door, then twice again. And waited.

The tiny peephole winked as somebody inside checked him out. Then the door opened. Just a crack.

"We're closed."

"I know. I'm Brownie, I own the Lounge up on Dequinder. Tell Fatback I need to see him. It's important."

The door closed a moment, then opened to admit him. Bass, Fatback's bouncer/bodyguard, patted Brownie down for weapons, then waved him through.

Inside, the blind pig was empty, chairs stacked on tables while an ancient janitor mopped the hardwood floor. Skeletal microphone stands stood on a small stage in the corner. The only difference between this joint and Brownie's was a liquor license and the gaming tables. Roulette, craps, blackjack. All illegal.

So were his operating hours. Fatback's place opened around midnight, stayed open till five or six. Or around the clock if a serious game got going.

Fatback was at the end of the bar, sipping a Vernors, thumbing through his cash register receipts. His nickname suited him. Five foot five, three hundred sixty pounds, with a full beard, Fatback looked like a black Santa Claus in a China blue sharkskin suit. Custom tailored, it fit without a wrinkle. Brownie pulled up a stool next to him. Fat kept counting.

"We've got trouble," Brownie said quietly.

"What trouble? I'm just tryin' to run a business."

"I dropped Moishe Abrams in front of this place last night," Brownie said, shading the truth. "I know he came in here, Fat. What the hell happened?"

Fat glanced up at him, then shook his head. "What always happens with the jukebox king?" he sighed, jotting down the tape tally in a tiny notebook. "Trouble happened. And thanks a bunch for dropping him off. Why didn't you fire a couple of rounds through my front door while you were at it? Gimme a friendly warning."

"I figured you'd notice Moishe soon enough. Did he get in somebody's face?"

"Mine, for openers. I didn't want to serve him, he was already loaded. Told me if I didn't he'd toss my damn jukebox out the window and me with it."

"Sounds like Moishe. So?"

"So I gave him a bottle. What else could I do? Didn't figure he'd cause much trouble. I was dead wrong about that."

"Why? What went down?"

"Nothin' at first. Place was pret-

ty quiet. Couple of card games, some craps goin' on. The kid they call Little Diddley was playin' guitar, but nobody was payin' him no mind. Too damn hot to dance. Moishe yelled at Diddley to quit singin' them blues. Little D don't know who Moishe is, tells him to screw hisself. I told the kid to pack it in for the night just to save his damn life." Fatback shook his head, remembering.

"Then Moishe decides he wants to play some cards. Butts into Charlie Cee's game. Them studs been at it all night, serious money changin' hands. Seven, eight hundred bucks every pot. Moishe antes up a grand, plays awhile. Loses his ass, naturally. He's too drunk to pitch pennies, to say nothin' of playin' cut-throat poker. Then Moishe claims Charlie Cee's cheatin'."

"Sweet Jesus," Brownie whistled. "What happened?"

"All hell broke loose. Charlie came out of his chair with a piece. Me and Bass jumped in, cooled Charlie down, and hustled Moishe's ass out of the place. Might cost me my jukebox, but it's better'n havin' Moishe kill somebody in here or get killed his own self."

Brownie was staring at him.

"What?" Fatback asked, annoyed.

"You haven't heard, have you?"

"Ain't heard nothin' about nothin', Brownie. I just rolled in here ten minutes ago. Why? What's up?"

"Moishe bought the farm last night. Somebody cut him up. His body turned up on the street a couple of blocks from here. His people are lookin' to bleed somebody for it."

"Aw, man, you got to be kiddin',"

Fatback moaned. "Who his people lookin' for?"

"You. Or maybe me. They don't much care. They just wanna burn somebody quick. Any chance Moishe waited outside for Charlie Cee, maybe mixed it up with him?"

"Nah. I bounced Moishe around three thirty. Cee's game didn't break up until seven or so. I closed up, and me and Cee went over to my woman's in Greektown for breakfast."

"Cee was with you the whole time?" Brownie pressed.

"Yeah, damn it. The whole time, just me and . . ." Fatback broke off, frowning.

"What is it?" Brownie asked.

"Just thinking. Half a dozen people saw Charlie Cee and Moishe get into it. But I'm the only one can cover for Cee after."

"Sell Charlie out? That's pretty cold, Fatback."

"Hey, me and Cee ain't family, you know? If somebody's gotta get whacked over this, better him than us. Got any better ideas?"

"Not yet," Brownie said, rising. "Hang loose, I'll get back to you. Gonna be here?"

"Got nowhere else to be," Fat sighed. "Might want to knock extra hard if you come back, though. I'm gonna lock this place down and turn my jukebox up extra loud. Any way you figure it, I probably won't have it for long."

Outside, Brownie stood at the top of the stairway looking around. According to Fatback, Moishe got tossed at three thirty. What would he do next? Where would he go?

Nowhere. The answer came to him as surely as the turnaround in an old blues tune. Moishe would never accept getting bounced by a black man. He'd look to get even. And right away. So he wouldn't go anywhere. He'd wait for Fatback or Charlie Cee.

Where?

Only one place. Against the warehouse wall in the shadows of the loading dock. Concealed there, you could watch the door and the stairway and make your move when somebody showed.

Trotting down the stairs, Brownie quickly scanned the area. Spotted the signs almost immediately. Polka dots. Dark droplets, more brownish than red now, spattered across the cardboard boxes that littered the alley floor.

Dried blood. Easy to miss if you weren't looking.

Damn.

Brownie nudged the loose boxes around with the toe of his shoe, half expecting to find a body beneath them. He didn't. Instead he found a battered chipboard guitar case. The name Little Diddley was crudely lettered on the side in white paint. Spattered with polka dots.

"The kid's real name is Jonas Arquette," Fatback said. "Calls hisself Little Diddley 'cause he tries to sing like Bo." They were in Brownie's Studebaker headed down Eighth as the steamy dusk settled over Detroit, darkening the streets without cooling them a single degree.

"Diddley worked for you long?"

"Few weeks. Came up from New Orleans a month or so back, scuffin' for gigs. Boy sings pretty good, plays a mean guitar."

"And works cheap," Brownie added dryly.

"That, too," Fatback grinned. "But it's not like I'm rippin' him off. I gave him a gig playin' after hours, got him a room over at the Delmore Arms where most of the players stay. Figured the kid could make some connections, maybe get hooked up with somethin' steady, you know? And this is how he pays me back. Gets into a jam with the damn jukebox king. Might as well head for the morgue and pick out a slab for hisself."

"Maybe he's already there," Brownie said, wheeling the Stude into the Delmore Arms parking lot. "Cops said they found a stiff in an alley on the Corridor last night, beaten to death."

"You think it was Diddley?"

"They didn't mention a name. Let's find out."

Fatback slipped the Delmore desk clerk a five for a key to the kid's room. He and Brownie rode four floors up, the rickety elevator rattling like a cattle car on the Rock Island Line.

Didn't bother to knock. Fat silently unlocked the door, and the two men warily edged into the dark room. Brownie switched on the light.

"Aw, man," Fat breathed. A body was on the bed, a tangled mess wrapped in bloodstained sheets. Fatback held a pudgy finger to the kid's throat, shaking his head. "He's alive. But not by much."

"And not for long, no matter how you figure it," Brownie said, gingerly picking up Moishe's bloody razor from the nightstand.

Fat glanced at the razor, his mouth narrowing. Then he slapped the kid. Hard. "Wake up, Jonas! Come on."

Diddley's eyes snapped open, flicked from Fat to Brownie and back again, dazed, terrified. Tried to sit up, then fell back, groaning.

"What happened last night?" Fat asked. "What'd you do?"

"Nothin', I swear," the kid rasped. "It was crazy. I was headin' out like you told me; old dude jumped me. Never said nothin' to me, just come out of the dark with a razor. Moved like lightning. Must've cut me five times before I knew what the hell was happenin'."

"Then why aren't you dead?" Brownie asked reasonably. "Moishe is."

"The old dude's dead?"

"You know damn well he is," Fat growled. "You did him."

"No," the kid said, wincing, remembering. "I was holdin' my guitar in front of me, just tryin' to stay alive. His razor stuck in the case. I grabbed it, swung at him a couple times, just lookin' to back him off me, you know? He took off runnin' one way, I went the other. Came back here. Snuck in. Guess I passed out. Damn, I gotta go back. I lost my guitar."

"Relax, I've got it in my car," Brownie said. "You stay still or you'll start bleedin' again."

Turning away, he motioned Fatback over.

"Now what?"

"He's cut up pretty bad," Fat shrugged. "Needs a doctor."

"If we take him to a hospital like he is, Moishe's people are gonna hear about it five minutes later. We might as well shoot him now, save them the trouble."

"Maybe he's got it comin'," Fat said evenly. "He's the one that mixed it up with the jukebox king."

"It wasn't his fault and you know it. Moishe didn't know who the kid was and didn't care. After you bounced him, he jumped the first black man who came down those steps. Could've been you, me, anybody."

"That's Diddley's tough luck."

"And ours, too. Diddley works for you, Fat, and I dropped Moishe off at your place. Tony Junior's mob is so paranoid they'll figure we set Moishe up for the Italians. We can hand the kid over to 'em gift-wrapped and still get killed."

"So? What do we do? Dummy up, hope this blows over?"

"Can't. We found the kid, it's only a matter of time before they do, too. Do you know a doctor who can keep his mouth shut?"

"My brother-in-law's a medic, ex-army."

"He'll have to do. Get him over here, patch the kid up. But no hospital."

"You got somethin' in mind, Brownie?"

"Hell, no."

Brownie sighed, wrapping the bloody razor in his handkerchief, slipping it into his pocket. "All I know is it's too damn hot to think straight, and I'm tired of bein' pushed around. I'm ready to push

back. How 'bout you, Fat? You up for some trouble?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"No," Brownie grinned. "Come to think of it, I guess you don't."

Waiting in the air-conditioned lobby of Churchill's Grill, Tony Zeman, Jr., felt a twinge of unease. He'd sent Red for the car five minutes ago. What was the holdup? He was about to head back into the restaurant when his black Lincoln rolled up out front. A pudgy black valet in a blue blazer opened the rear door and stood aside, smiling.

But as Tony climbed into the Lincoln, the valet scrambled in after him, closing the door, seizing his wrists with one hand as he jerked Tony's pistol out of its shoulder holster. "Don't do nothin' sudden, Mr. Zeman," Brownie said, gunning the Lincoln into traffic on Woodward. "We just want to talk."

"What the hell is this?" Junior blustered, eyeing the gun in Fatback's huge fist, trying to conceal his panic. "Where's my driver? Where's Red?"

"Back at the bar answering a bogus phone call. By the way, Red's way too dumb to be your bodyguard, Mr. Zeman. You need to hire better people."

"I'll look into it," Tony Junior said grimly. "What do you want, Brownie?"

"To give you a present," Brownie said, nodding at Fatback. Fat took a handkerchief out of his valet's blazer and laid it carefully on Junior's lap.

Junior hesitated a moment, then peeled back the linen to reveal the bloody razor. "My god."

"You recognize it?" Fatback asked.

"It's my uncle's. Where did you get it?"

"Bought it from some street kids. They took it off a body they found in an alley on Eighth last night."

"What body?"

"The guy your uncle beat to death before he died of his wounds. The guy who killed him."

"Who was he?"

"I don't know his name, but with your connections you should be able to find out easy enough. He's down at the city morgue. Unidentified body number fifty-four."

"Was he a professional? Was it a mob hit?"

"Not likely. No pro would have taken on your uncle one-on-one with a blade. Looks like it was a street scuffle that went bad for both of 'em. You know how your uncle was when he was drinkin', right?"

"I know how he was," Junior nodded, "but I don't know about you. Why should I believe you? How do I know you're not—"

"—working for the Italians?" Brownie grinned. "Because you're still breathin', young stud. If we were with those guys, you'd already be dead. Instead..." Brownie eased the Lincoln quietly to the curb and stopped. "We'll be getting out here. And congratulations, Mr. Zeman. You're the new jukebox king. Can I offer you some friendly advice?"

"Like what?" Junior said, swallowing, still half expecting a bullet from his own gun.

"The guy that turned up in the alley? Nobody knows what happened to him. You might want to put the word out that you happened to him, Mr. Zeman. That it was your people who took him down. Show the Italians how quick you can take out the trash."

"I'll think about it," Junior said, climbing warily out of the car, sliding behind the wheel.

"And my loan?" Brownie pressed. "We're even now, right?"

"I'll think about that, too," Tony yelled, mashing the gas.

The Lincoln tore off into the night, tires howling. Leaving Brownie and Fat standing at the curb. Next to Brownie's emerald green Studebaker. "Jukebox king," Fatback snorted. "You think you can trust that punk?"

"We can trust him to look out for number one," Brownie said. "Junior's in law school, so he must be at least half smart. And taking credit for the stiff in the alley is a smart move. If he goes for it, the kid's off the hook. And so are we."

"What loan were you talking about?"

"It doesn't matter. He'll weasel on the deal. I owe him six large, and those white boys are killin' each other over jukebox quarters."

"Them quarters add up."

"To what? Bleedin' out in an alley? All I know about jukes is what's on 'em. John Lee Hooker, Muddy Waters; they're the real jukebox kings. People will be playin' their music a hundred years from now. Nobody'll care who got the quarters."

"We might care. If it was us."

"Meaning what?"

"After seein' Junior up close, I ain't sure he's smart enough to hang onto the jukebox business, Brownie. Or tough enough."

"You want to be the jukebox king, Fat? Like Moishe? Look what it got him."

"Okay, maybe not a king," Fatback conceded. "Too risky. I ain't sayin' we should try to grab up the whole thing. But maybe we could take back the action around the Corridor. In our end of town."

"Like . . . jukebox princes?"

"Yeah, that's it," Fatback said with satisfaction, his vast face brightening. "Jukebox princes. Listen here, after you close up tonight, why don't you come on down to my place. We'll shoot us some pool, drink some beers. And figure out how to be jukebox princes. What do you say?"

"Gotta admit it does sound interesting," Brownie nodded, mulling it over. "Jukebox princes? Yeah. Why not?"

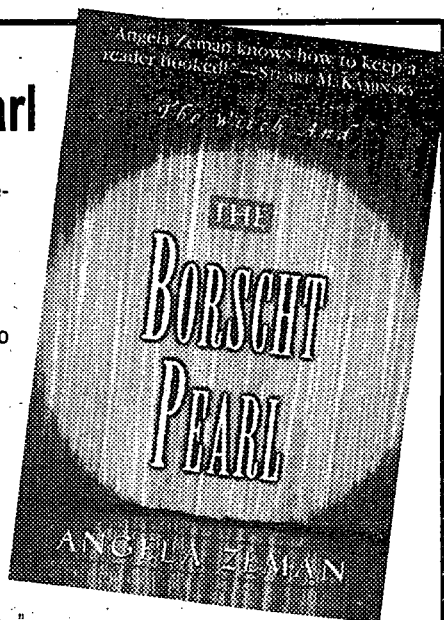
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The book received praise from **PUBLISHERS WEEKLY**, as well as from

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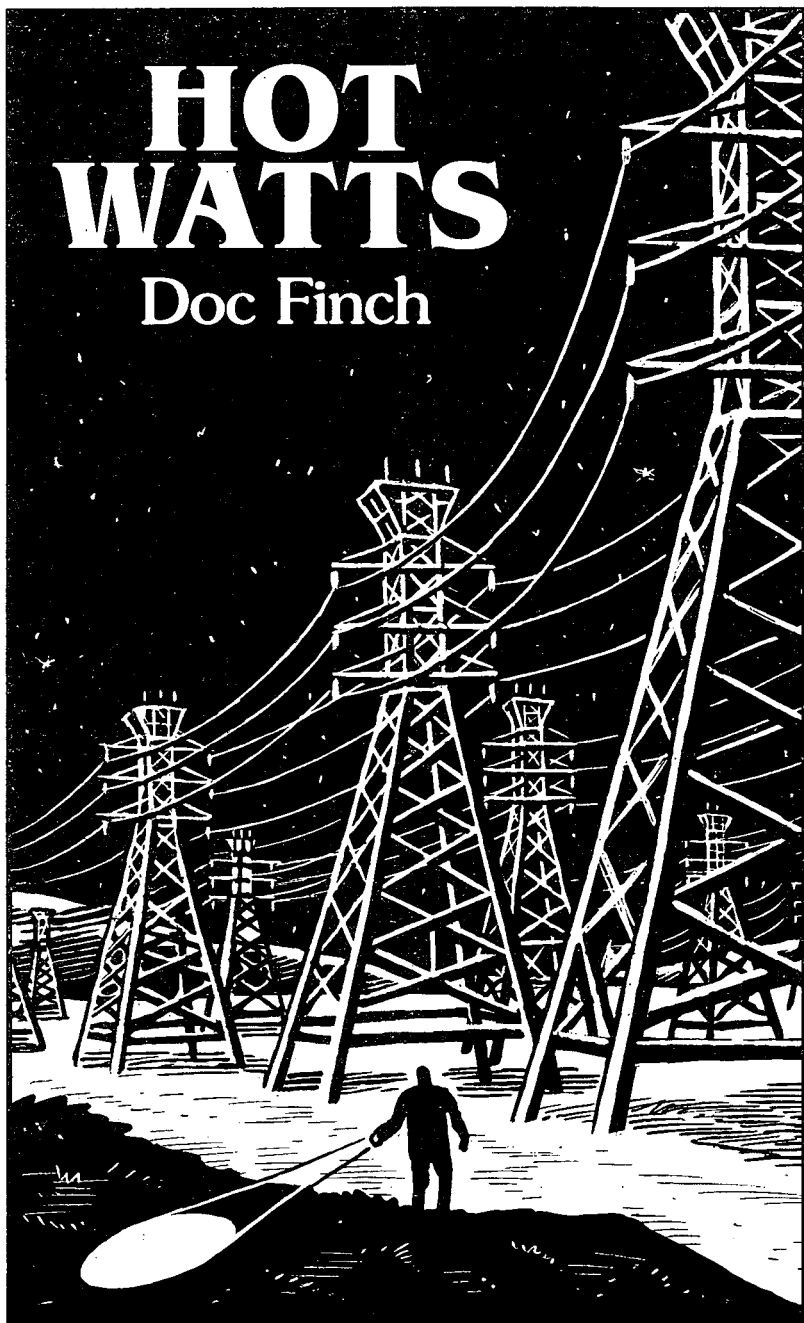


Illustration by Dan Krovatin

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Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 6/02

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I was at my office computer, writing speculative fiction into the expense section of an invoice to Big Amp Industries, when the screen gave me a warning beep, and after a few seconds the Sony Secretary program announced in a dulcet voice, "Mr. Van Klampett of Helio-Power is on the line."

"Hold 'im for a second. Gotta look up his bona fides . . ."

"Robert Van Klampett, Helio-Power vice president in charge of generation, located at Desert Junction, California, at their seven hundred forty-four megawatt solar power generating station. Harvard B.S., Stanford M.S., he is a member of—"

"Thank you, please connect."

"Hi, Bob," I said, trying to sound as if I knew him. I didn't.

"Hello, Plaid," he said, sounding as if he actually did remember me.

"This is Bob Van Klampett. We've got a little pilfering problem, and your friend, Al Alvarez, said you did . . . contracting in company problems without, uh, how should I put it . . ."

"Quickly, without asking questions, and without—if you prefer—written contracts? That about what he said? By the way, it's Vlad, Vlad Smith. How may I help you?"

"Ah, this is a little sensitive. Do you have a secure line?"

I glanced at the row of lights beneath the screen. All the lights on the Tap Sensor were green except one. It blinked red.

"We're fine here," I said, "but you've got an audio sensor somewhere near your set. Want to find a secure link, then call me back?"

He called back in under three minutes. It sounded like serious trouble to get a VP moving that fast.

"I'm on a Securelink connection in our conference room. How's it look to you?"

"Green board. Go ahead."

"We're losing power before we can get it out on the transmission lines—somewhere between the photovoltaic cells and the switchyard. It's just going away, and it's getting worse every day. I'm sure it's being stolen."

I was sure he was right. Since the Power Crash of '04, electricity—actually, energy of any kind—had become a precious commodity. Energy theft was now a felony, and a major one. It was also big business, both for those who did it and those who prevented it. I made my living in that business.

"Sounds simple enough. Just get your distribution manager and field engineer to inspect everything from the panels to the metering section—that should pinpoint the leak."

"Done that. Didn't even find a grounded wire. The power's just trickling away somewhere, and we don't meter individual panels. My God, we've got over a hundred thousand of them out there! We'd go broke trying to put meters on all of them."

I started to remind him of the huge amounts of money the energy sellers raked in and then stopped when I realized he was trying to give me some of it.

"Suppose I come out next week and take a look if you haven't—"



"No, we need it located—fixed—as soon as possible. I've had the bean counters do an analysis on our weekly losses, and they show a definite drop in each week's power sold."

"So, how much more money can you lose in a week?"

"It's not entirely the money. You know how power pirates are—one finds a way to steal energy without getting caught and next thing you know, everything you own has a siphon on it."

"All right," I said, "I'll start driving out tonight. I'll be there day after—"

"Fly. Catch a plane tonight."

"Do you know what av gas is going for right now? I haven't flown since the FAA allowed the airlines to add a fuel cost to each ticket, and that was ten years ago, back in 2006. Why, it would cost—"

"We'll pay."

"On my way."

"We'll leave a vehicle at the San Diego airport. Pick it up at the Avis lot. See me first thing tomorrow morning."

He hung up. Now that he was paying me, he wasn't polite any more. I was familiar with the attitude.

The plane got into San Diego at a little after midnight. I quickly found my baggage at the carousel and the vehicle at Avis. It was methane-powered; I had hoped for a fuel cell-powered one. This one had a better range, though, if less power. I took I-5 north a short way and then turned east along I-8, over the rocky hills and into the desert.

I rolled the windows down and enjoyed the cool, dry smells of the night desert.

There was a truck stop at El Centro, so I stopped and had breakfast. I paused in the parking lot to admire the cyber locks on a big rig's fuel tanks and the armored gas lines leading away from them. Their chrome sparkled in the single mercury arc lamp that lit the huge lot. A tall, heavysset fellow stepped out from behind the truck and stood watching me. He had something in a hand held down against his leg that sparkled with chrome, too. I nodded at him politely, got in my transport, and retreated to the interstate.

Out past El Centro I began following the preprogrammed GPS instructions that had been left in the vehicle. They led me farther and farther into the dark, empty desert. The road was wide and well kept up, which I appreciated, as all the crossroads I passed were gravel and sand, mostly sand.

Just as false dawn began to show the full sweep and beauty of the desert, I came to the end of the road. Actually, the road continued for some distance; I could see it through the closed steel pipe and wire gate that supported a huge HELIO-POWER sign. An elderly man in a guard's uniform shuffled out of the gatehouse and over to my window. He was listing to the right as he came. I figured it was the hand cannon in a holster on his right leg that caused the tilt.

"You got business, or you lost?" he greeted me.

"Here to see Robert Van Klam-



pett. He said see him first thing this morning. This looks close to that."

"Ain't here. You'll have to wait."

"Can I wait inside? Maybe by a coffee machine somewhere?"

"Nope. Park it on the side of the road and don't get in the drift sand, we ain't got no wreckers to pull that thing out."

I saw no point in arguing with him. I backed the vehicle up, carefully keeping at least two wheels on the pavement. I had no faith in the engine's power to get the thing out of anything worse than a puddle of water, which I wasn't likely to find out here anyway.

Two hours later, with the sun well up and vehicles of various kinds beginning to fill in the smallish parking lot next to the larger of the two buildings I could see, a black limousine swept in through the open gate. Figuring that only a power company VP would drive a black car in the desert, I started my vehicle and eased it onto the road and down to the gate, where the guard had come out to watch me get stuck.

"Can I see Van Klampett now?"

He asked my name, found it on his list, and waved me in.

Inside the larger building, whose doors were emblazoned with a sign that read HELIO-POWER—DESERT JUNCTION OPERATIONS, the air conditioning was busy preparing for the day's heat. A cool looking secretary met me just inside and escorted me to the third floor office of Mr. Van Klampett. I was impressed with the elevator—it worked; the elevator in my building hadn't run

in years. A man in a shortsleeved shirt and a serious tie met me at the door. "Hi," he said, sticking out a hand. "I'm Van Klampett. You must be Vlad."

"Right." We surveyed each other. He was late forties, tanned, healthy looking, with short hair just going hairdresser-gray at the temples. Deep worry lines showed in his face.

"This is Gary Dunbar," Van Klampett said. "He's the transmission manager." I shook hands with a heavysset man in khakis. He was smiling, but it didn't look natural below the hard eyes in his rough-hewn, heavily tanned face. His hair was so short it was difficult to tell its color.

"... to know you," he muttered. "I'll show you around, but it's a waste of time. My teams've already been over everything. It's just a buncha grounds from insulation breakdown in the heat."

"That keep getting incrementally worse?" said Van Klampett. "Insulation breakdowns don't happen step by step. Here, you can see the layout from the window."

He waved his hand at the two long, tinted windows that made up the corner of the office. They faced east and north. I looked at the north view first. It was striking.

Long lines of black, glinting rectangles, appearing to float above the concretelike desert floor, stretched into the distance. Despite the clarity of the air, I couldn't see the end of them—they just seemed to meet at a vanishing point, like railroad tracks. Except there were a hell of a lot more than two lines.



"Our electrical 'generators.' Couple of million photocells mounted on motorized panels that track the sun—sunrise to sunset. We tap the power off each panel, join it to others, bring the collection cables back into the Transmission Building, and tailor it for distribution to our clients."

He pointed at a two story, windowless building surrounded by fenced-in transformers, switching units, and high voltage lines.

"You don't transmit direct current, do you? You convert it there?"

Dunbar nodded, "In the Transmission Building. Got a bunch of inverters to change direct current to alternating current at sixty hertz, so it'll match the power grid. The transformers step it up to match the grid voltage. All automatic."

I turned and looked east, where the panels were facing and tracking the morning sun. There was a tall cyclone fence stretching north, paralleling the lines of photocell panels. It appeared to have barbed wire on top. Beyond the fence, the sand dunes started, extending eastward in smooth, tan mounds. Through a low spot in the dunes, I could just glimpse a trace of gray-green; the only color out there other than hard blue sky and the tan dunes.

"The fence to keep out people or animals?"

Dunbar snorted. "Mostly people. We shoot the animals. These are high tech photocells, and expensive to replace. We ain't lost any since the fence was put up."

"Okay. I might as well get started—I think I'll just tour around the field to get a feel for how the pow-

er's collected. Do you have some prints showing how the connections from the panels join?"

"Yeah," said Dunbar, "I'll have 'em put in your . . . vehicle. But be careful driving out there—hit one of those panels and it'll come outa your contract."

"Actually, I thought I'd walk. Can't see much while you're driving around."

"Huh!" he said. "Gets hot out there. You could get heat stroke, and I ain't got a crew to spare to follow you."

"I'll wear a hat," I assured him.

Van Klampett stood up and stuck out his hand again. "We reserved a room for you at the Oasis Motel, over in Skillet Flats. It's close by. Just go back to the second crossroad and go east. You can't miss it. The road ends there."

I was getting used to roads ending on me.

"And, Vlad," he said, "you'll see me first thing you find, right?"

"Just as soon as I find it."

It took me three days of walking to find it. I was going down the westernmost line of panels, pausing at each to scan the cable connections and the condition of the panel. I had started at the far north end, driving there each morning and walking down the panels until the two one-liter canteens on my webbed belt went nearly empty; then I'd go back to the vehicle to eat lunch and refill the canteens. When I saw something unusual or broken, I'd make a note of it. I intended to give the notes to Van Klampett even if I didn't find anything else.



I looked under the latest panel on my route and noticed a dark spot on the ground near the center pedestal. Another gear box leak, I thought. I had found several. I knelt down to see how bad this one was and found the flowers. In the shade under the panel was a small clump of desert wildflowers.

Odd, I thought, it's August. These things only grow in April. When it rains.

I unfolded my buck knife and punched at the hardpan. It was like trying to penetrate an anvil. I moved over and pushed the blade tip at the ground near the flowers. It slid in. I walked around the panel, looking carefully at the ground. Along a line from the panel to the fence, I found traces of recent growth. The plants were too desiccated and scattered to identify, but I bet on wildflowers. Someone had poured water on the clay hardpan, and the wildflower seeds, lying dormant and waiting for the spring rains, had responded.

Someone had softened the desert soil to allow working it. I moved back to the pedestal and, crouching in the shade, carefully began digging. I found the cable about three inches down, coming out of a newly drilled hole in the pedestal. The normal pickup cable ran from the bottom of the panel into a conduit that ran from panel to panel on an above-ground rack. I tugged at the normal pickup cable, and it slid out into my hand. It had been neatly severed and stuffed back into its panel. No one driving by, or even walking, would have noticed. The illegal power pickup went under the

fence and into the dunes. But where in the dunes?

By the time the sun was low in the west, I had found twenty-two more of the illegal power pickoffs. All were buried, and as near as I could tell, all led under the fence. I found the thieves' entry point near one of the fenceposts. The fencing had been cut about halfway up next to the pole and then laced back to the pole with several lengths of stainless steel wire. It would be the work of a minute to open it as a gate. I carefully tied my neckerchief to the fencing about six inches off the ground and quit for the day.

"What was Skillet Flats before it became a ghost town?" I asked Pete, the Oasis Motel and Cafe owner as I ate his chipped-plate special. He was my landlord, too, since I had moved into one of his "air-conditioned suites." It was a suite because it had two doors, one east, one west, so you could always use the shady side. The room air was conditioned by an evaporative cooler on the roof. He only ran it on special occasions.

"Was a mining center." He was a grizzled old coot with sun-blasted hair and skin. His clothing looked pretty blasted, too.

"What'd they mine around here?"

"Dunno. Minerals. Back along the creekbed."

"Creekbed?" I knew the Colorado River ran through here somewhere but had no idea it was close.

"Over by the power plant. It's dry 'cept in April, maybe in December sometimes. Called Hell's Creek. The mine's down the creek a ways.

Can't miss it. Got a rough track along the creek and the road—"

"—ends there," I finished with him.

I stopped before the road ended and parked the methane-mobile on loose rock behind a sand dune. I locked it, picked up my pack, and hiked over the dunes to where I could see Helio-Power's fence in the moonlight. My watch showed nearly two in the morning. I followed the dunes north until I saw the neckerchief hanging on the wires, and then I went east into the sand. I crossed a dune, sliding back a foot for every two I climbed, and was resting in preparation for the second torturous hill when I heard voices.

I went up that second dune quickly and slowly poked my head over the top.

A group of men were working in the depression between the dunes. I slid the night glasses out of the pack and focused on them. There were three men. They had uncovered a connection box in the sand and were hooking up a cable from the Helio-Power site to it. I could see a large number of cables leading into the box—I was sure there were twenty-four, counting the new one. One heavy cable led out of the box and disappeared into the sand in the direction of Hell's Creek.

I watched as they finished the work and carefully covered over the box and cables. I figured another solar panel had just changed its business affiliation. The men picked up their tools and moved off; I followed, one dune behind.

When the dunes ended, I crawled to the top of the last one and peeked around the edge. I could see a wooden, falling-apart building backed up against the sand hills. Mine tailings ran down either side of it, and a dilapidated windlass sat close by. Beyond a dusty road, the creek was a shallow depression in the rock and hardpan, winding generally south-east. A fringe of dusty looking trees straggled along its banks, looking for the once-a-year water. An ancient rural electric line ran along the higher portions of the bank. A connection dropped from it to the wooden mine building. The power poles were weathered to pure white and leaning oddly, but I could see their new insulators and wiring shining in the moonlight.

The three cable layers came down the rise, kicking the sand off their boots. I noticed several heavy black cables on the ground, all leading into the mine building.

"We got it hooked in. Can we get outa here after sunup, Frank?"

A taller man stepped out of the shadowy doorway into the moonlight. "You bet, soon's I see it works. Charlie, get back up on that dune and call the boss. Tell 'im it's okay for Manuel to take another unit," said Frank, "and tell him not to forget to up the payment. Ours, too."

The first man turned away and started struggling up the dune while the others headed for the building. Frank crossed the road and closed a remote disconnect at the utility pole that fed the building.

"Didn't want nothin' coming back



up the line at me when I was wiring this baby in," he said to his companions, now slumped against the building sucking on what might have been cigarettes.

"You know, I was wondering about that," said one of the smokers. "What keeps old Manuel from walking right back up that line and taking over this whole shebang?"

"Not a thing except first he's gotta figure out exactly where we tied this into his one-city electric grid. Lotta wires running around Yuma. It ain't metered in, but he can sell the power we supply, and since it ain't metered, he pockets the difference—less our fee, of course."

"We doin' any more this week?"

"We'll do one more tomorrow night, then knock off for awhile."

I lay very still on the back slope of the sand listening to Charlie make his call from less than twenty feet away. He conveyed the information he had been told to. He didn't call the "boss" by name even once. When he disconnected and started down the hill, so did I, but I went down the other side. When I finally got back to the methane monster, I nursed it onto the track, found the main road, and made my way to the Oasis Motel, as the neon sign called it, and went to bed.

"I was beginning to think you got lost out there in the Photovolt Field." Van Klampett chuckled and waved me in. "Find anything?"

"Quite a bit. I found some of the disconnected panels, and I saw how the power's being stolen."

"Great! That's great." The worry

lines in his brow began to smooth out. "Just a minute . . . Miss Updike, hold all my calls." He released the button on his phone console, and I glanced at it. A tiny red light was blinking on one of the buttons. Van Klampett cleared his throat; he was looking at me expectantly.

"Yes . . . ah, last night I saw three men connecting into one of the panels and leading the cable off the site. They buried it so you wouldn't notice." I was thinking fast, trying to reorganize my thoughts on the fly. "Unfortunately, I was inside the fence and unarmed, so I couldn't follow them. But I know the direction they went, and tomorrow morning when it gets light I'm going to follow them and get the facts."

"The facts? Damn the facts, we'll catch them. We'll get the police in here tonight and catch them red-handed! We'll put them away for good—power pirates are getting over twenty-five years nowadays."

"Do that and somebody else will show up later in the year—we need to find out who's paying them. Who's buying the power. Stop the whole business. Give me another day. I'll follow them tomorrow morning and get some answers."

Slowly, reluctantly, he thought it over and agreed. "But day after tomorrow—the whole bunch gets put away."

"Yep, guaranteed," I told him. "Now I'm going to go get some rest—I was up late last night."

I was in the parking lot encouraging the swamp gas sedan to start when big chunky Dunbar came out of the Transmission Building and

waved at me. I waited. I figured my vehicle wouldn't outrun him.

"Glad I caught you. I just got a call from a friend of mine. He says he knows a place some guys been hauling electrical equipment into—including inverters." He stood back and beamed at me. The Sherlock Holmes of the Southwest.

"And?"

"Well, we'll—you and me—go out there and investigate. May be somebody trying to steal our power. How about it?"

"Where is it?"

"The Hell's Creek mine—an old played-out fluorite mine. What say you meet me tomorrow morning at seven o'clock, before work, and we'll check it out? It's on the way in anyway."

"Sounds like a lead," I said. "How do I find you at seven?"

He gave me the familiar directions, right down to "it ends there" and watched as I made notes and a rough map. "Think I can find it. See you there."

He nodded, and then had an afterthought.

"You got a gun?"

"I flew in," I reminded him. "They won't let you take along a gun. Or even nail clippers."

"Right, I forgot. I'll bring one for you."

I was high up on my favorite sand dune by two thirty the next morning. I hadn't bothered to follow the working party in—I knew that drill. I was watching Frank check his wiring and close the disconnect, watching the boys slouch against the building and smoke, watching

Charlie slog up the sand dune to get high enough for his cellular phone to work and make his call. I closed my eyes and rested a moment, out of his sight.

"Hey, Frank! The boss don't answer." The shout snapped me fully awake. I squirmed around to where I could see him. He was looking down the hill.

"Then call Manuel direct and tell him. We'll tell the boss later."

I heard the faint beeps, then Charlie again.

"Hello? Hello, is this Manuel? Okay, this is . . . I'm with the power hookup crew if you know what—"

There was a long pause. I could hear faint, fast, shrill sounds from the phone, and then, "No, sir, I didn't know anything about that. No, sir, I really didn't. I can't tell you that. I'm sorry . . ." Charlie hung up and yelled, "Frank! Frank! You better come up here and call Manuel back. I've never heard anybody so mad. He says the boss doubled the fee and he's gonna go broke and the boss is threatening to call the Feds if he don't pay and—"

Charlie stopped yelling when the shots began. I rolled to my right and sneaked a look around the dune. One of the smokers was sprawled in the moonlight, a dark pool growing from under him in the sand. The other smoker was lying, broken looking, half in the shadows of the mine building. Frank was sprinting for his old white van. He didn't make it. Something invisible caught him halfway and turned him around, then dropped him in the middle of the road.



Charlie had thrown away the phone and was scrambling up a nearby dune, looking for shelter on its other side. He almost made it. I heard the smack of the bullet and instantly afterward the crack of a hunting rifle, and Charlie stood up from his crawl and fell over backwards. He flopped and rolled loosely almost all the way to the bottom of the sandhill. It got very quiet. I was reluctant to slide farther behind my dune, lest the hunter out there hear the whisper of the sand grains.

Motion caught my eye, and I focused on it. A big man was coming down to the dry creek from the far side and climbing into it. He had a hunting rifle under one arm. He came up out of the creekbed, walked to the warped plank wall of the mine building, and stood over the two men there. The man kicked one body, then went out to look at Frank in the road. He extended the rifle barrel and fired another round into Frank, walked back to the mine building, leaned his gun against the wall, and went inside.

I decided to stay where I was.

The man came back out of the building, grabbed Frank by his heels, and dragged him, head bouncing loosely, through the door of the mine building and out of sight. He was gone for five minutes. I timed him.

When he entered the building with his next burden, I came out from behind the dune, picked up Charlie's phone, and retreated to a dune farther away from the massacre. Settling down near the

top, I unfolded the phone and, holding my breath, punched the redial button. Somebody's phone rang.

"Si?"

"Señor Manuel, please, it is a friend. I have news regarding the increase in power rates," I said in Spanish.

"Who is this?" a new, harsher, and angry voice said.

"I am a friend of Al Alvarez in San Diego. My name is Vlad."

"Wait."

I waited. After ten minutes that seemed like an hour, the voice returned, not so angry now. "Al says if you wake him at this hour again, your health is in danger. What news do you have?"

"I can tell you how to disconnect from the problem power seller. You may choose to disconnect the wires or the man, as you see fit."

"And in return, you want what?"

"If you regard this as a favor, then I shall expect a favor in return, someday in the future."

"That is satisfactory. What information do you have?"

I explained exactly where the power tap operation was located and how it was funneled to his location. I also told him that seven in the morning would be a good time to arrive, and that he might have a warm welcome. He thanked me, and then said, "The machine here says you are calling from a phone known to belong to 'Charlie.' How is that possible?"

"Charlie has no further use for a phone," I said, "as his boss has removed all worldly cares from his shoulders."



"So it is like that? Thank you." He broke the connection.

I threw the phone into a valley between the dunes and made my way back to my original observation spot.

The bulky man seemed to have finished with the bodies; he was now moving the work van out of the area. I watched him drive it slowly and carefully beyond the end of the road and on into the desert, lurching slowly over boulders, rocks, and sand drifts. As soon as the van was out of sight, I raced down the hill and ducked into the mine building. The inverters and electrical switching equipment filled one side of the room, but I didn't see the bodies. Then I saw a swath of drying red on the dusty floor and followed it to a boarded up section of the wall. I pulled loose one of the boards and found myself looking into the pit.

Of course, I thought. The mine shaft.

I pressed the board back into place and went back to my post on the duneside. I watched the sniper come back with his own vehicle, a large four-wheel-drive pickup—probably even gasoline powered—and park it casually in front of the mine building. Then he picked out a shooter's blind behind a small clump of driftwood and brush just across the dry creek and settled in to wait. It didn't look very defensible to me, but he probably didn't expect to have to defend against anyone.

At ten of seven the cars showed up. There were two, both black, with heavily tinted windshields. One pulled up behind the pickup

and sat there, no one getting out. I could see the sniper peering around the outside of his hide, trying to make out the people inside. The other car had stopped up the road. I could see it but the sniper couldn't. Four men got out of it; the driver opened the trunk of the car, and they gathered around. They all had short dark hair, dark sunglasses, and stony expressions. They all made selections from the trunk and then strolled across the dry creek, slinging the automatic weapons as if they were golf bags and they were on their way to the first tee.

For the next fifteen minutes nothing happened except that the sniper got increasingly more nervous, moving about from side to side, trying to see what was happening with the car in his sight. It sat there idling softly, air conditioning humming, blank and black and quietly threatening.

One of the golfers across the creek hit his first drive. It spouted a line of sand, rock, and leaves all across the front of the sniper's hide. It sounded like a fully automatic weapon to me. Then a second drive drew a line down the side of the hide, and shortly thereafter a hunting rifle with a scope came flying out of the bushes and bounced on the rock and sand.

The sniper stood up, hands on head, and looked at the three men who had just gotten out of the silent car. One of them said good morning to him and waved him over.

The last I saw of them, they were all filing into the mine building. When the door closed behind them, I went down the dune and away. As



I jogged up the road to my vehicle, I thought I heard fireworks behind me. A lot of fireworks.

I was sitting in Van Klampett's office just before lunch. He was very cheerful; the heavy worry lines on his brow had almost disappeared.

"So you found the problem. Excellent. Excellent. Do you have a report?"

I held up a single sheet of paper.

"I have the location numbers of forty-four photovoltaic panels on here. If you send your crews out to rewire and reconnect them, you'll be back on line in a half day. I calculate that you are losing, with these out, right at a hundred thousand dollars a day. So, for that half-day restoration, I'd like right at fifty thousand dollars. In cash."

The worry lines came back.

"You understand we can't do business that way. I need a report; you need to submit an invoice for processing. You understand, the standard contract—" He stopped, looking suddenly puzzled.

"Correct," I said, "no contract. You asked for help; I said I would provide it. Done and done."

"Still," he said, "we must be businesslike." A couple of worry lines smoothed out.

"Very good." I stood up, folding the paper and putting it in my pocket. His eyes followed the paper. "I'll get right back to the office and get an invoice started. You should have it in a week, ten days,

what with the new postal service energy conservation program."

"But the . . . the report, the locations."

"In keeping with accepted business practices, I'll send it with the invoices."

"Invoices?"

"Certainly. I found each problem individually, so there are forty-four separate tasks—"

"All right! All right." He was punching the call button for his secretary. He was faster at math than I had thought. The secretary entered.

Van Klampett was scrawling an initial on a disbursement form. "Here, pick this up, in cash, and give it to this man. Leave the envelope open so he can count it."

I handed the list of sabotaged panels to him. He read it carefully and began smiling again.

"What about the inverter—they had to have one for power transfer."

"In the Hell's Creek mine building. Along with some other things."

"I'll get Dunbar and his crew on this right away. I'll bet he'll be surprised."

"Not as much as he was this morning," I said, and stood as the secretary came in and handed me a large manila envelope. I stuck it under my arm and headed for the door. "And, Bob, the guys who set this up—I wouldn't worry about finding them or having a repeat of this. I'm quite sure they've gone underground."

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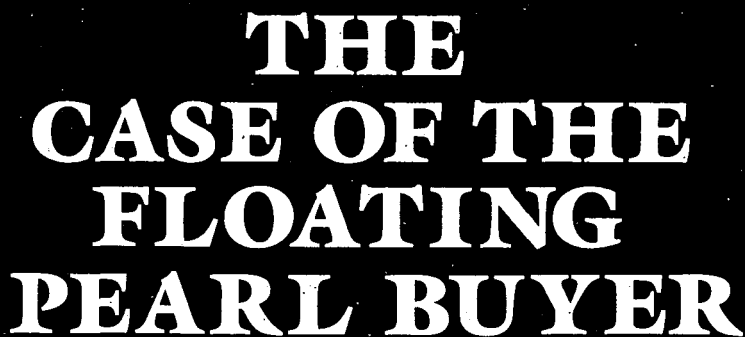
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Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 6/02

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It was during the summer of 1903 that Sheriff Huck Finn put the finishing touches on his reputation for being a lazy old coot. When the grocer told us that Fancy Watkins had been found admiring the bottom of Fishfly Slough, the sheriff never even lifted an eyebrow. It took considerably more persistence than just dying to coax a reaction out of him.

"That so?" Sheriff Huck said conversationally.

"It is," Ernest T. W. Bootlins said, taking time out to spit tobacco juice and wipe his chin on his red sleeve. "Musky found him day 'fore last."

Ernest T. W. ran a grocery packet that supplied all the clammers up and down the Mississippi, from Rock Island to Muscatine. Pearl fever had hit the river real hard that year, and he wasn't lacking for customers. He got to Fishfly Slough two or three times a week if his boiler didn't blow, and he brought all the news back to town free of charge. Considering what his eggs and coffee ran you, he'd better. He was a Mexican fella, big and brown as a grizzly, who dressed like a drum major 'cause he liked the gold braid on his shoulders and believed real strong that a grocer was an important man in the scheme of things. I wouldn't disagree with him on that.

Was a time when Ernest T. W. Bootlins' name was Guadalupe Martinez de la Rosa, but that proved far too romantic for a man selling grits and cornstarch to make any headway. For business reasons, he anglicized it, lifting the first part from a traveling preach-

er, the middle letters from a champion horse, and the last bit from a line of baby boots. He sure never got any drag from the sheriff about it, seeing as how the sheriff had lifted his own name from a boys' book. Sheriff Huck's godgiven name was Humfredo Mullendorfer, which he figured wasn't anywhere near romantic or swash-buckling enough to attract the voters of Marquis, Iowa. He figured right, too, having been reelected three times running. Seems that other Huck's reputation for befriending runaways and only filching what others didn't fully need and collecting money from judges—all that carried over just about right for a lawman.

'Course it helped that the sheriff looked a little like that other Huck might have after fifty years of wear and tear on the trail. He was none too clean a shaver, had hair the color of water spit out a rusty pipe and a physique that appeared to be built for sleeping. He dressed the part, too, with tobacco splashes on the toes of his cowboy boots and a string tie clasp that once rattled for a snake.

"Guess that means Fancy won't be heading out West the way he was always talking," the sheriff said, as always getting a tad misty about heading out West. His years out that way had been his glory days, the ones before he made the mistake of coming back home and getting yoked up with a childhood sweetheart who'd become a widow. Wiping a flyspeck from his eye, the sheriff added, "Musky say what got him?"



"He's thinking lead poisoning. Right between the eyes."

"Not sure?"

"Could have been the axe sticking in his back."

"Fancy shouldn't have been that hard to do away with," the sheriff said. "Wasn't that much to him."

"Wouldn't know about that," Ernest T. W. said. "Do know they're asking for you out at Pearl Town."

Pearl Town was a row of shacks on Fishfly Slough, summer quarters for local clammers.

"Why?" the sheriff asked, turning evasive. "Somebody else got lead poisoning, too?"

"Not that I heard of."

"Hmm. Hate to make the trip for just one."

Which pretty much summed up Sheriff Huck's philosophy on everything, but especially dead men. When it came to sleuthing, he was a powerfully big believer in letting things sort out themselves. Less hard feelings that way. When it came to voters, you always wanted to consider hard feelings, no matter how far to the next election.

"Tell you what," the sheriff said at last. "Why don't you see if someone can bring Fancy into town, and we'll take it from there."

This all sounded pretty rash to me, used as I was to the sheriff taking weeks to decide whether or not to arrest someone.

"Whatever you think best," Ernest T. W. said.

After that followed some gab about what the catfish were hitting on and whether Widow Oleander of Slick Bottom Creek really was going to get herself hitched

again and whether we could expect this heat spell to break anytime soon. It being August, the heat was something to behold, and I had to doubt that anyone out at Pearl Town had any ice to keep Fancy fresh. Once the grocer was gone, Sheriff Huck said to me, "Go tell my missus I might be late for supper, would you, Joe?"

I guess he needed some time to ruminate. He was a great believer in ruminating. Said the cows had it all over us in that department and took it as a matter of honor to raise our reputation whenever he had a chance. Also, his missus never had much luck with skilletts. Having shared a meal or two at the sheriff's table, I knew for a fact that his missus's creations usually tasted best after the flames were put out and the black scraped off. Besides, she always took the news of his lateness better from me. I think she was afraid of Indians.

When I got back to the jailhouse, the sheriff was whittling. He'd used up one hickory and was fast making shavings of the next. He didn't usually put any more energy into whittling than anything else, and a stout hickory mostly lasted him a week, maybe two.

Normally I headed home about now, but what with Fancy's new condition and the sheriff's whittling and the fact that our other deputy was dedicated to drinking himself blind, I decided to hang around a bit. It was always inspiring to see what lengths Sheriff Huck would go to when avoiding work.



So we sat a spell, letting the twilight wash over us. Not much speaking, which was fine with me, seeing's how lately the only fat the sheriff wanted to chew had to do with things that never happened to me or him but to that other Huck and Injun Joe, between the covers of a book. See, the sheriff hired me with hopes of trading adventure stories from the Dakotas and beyond, but I'm of the Illinois tribe, never west of Des Moines. Parents give me the name of Stanley, family name of Two-shot, 'cause we usually needed 'em, but the sheriff wouldn't budge from calling me Injun Joe no matter how many times I asked it. It's a sad thing to see a grown man dissolving into the pages of a book. I can't think of a worse way to go. More painful, yes. Worse, no. And Sheriff Huck had it pretty bad.

To keep my mind off that, I considered what had brought a man like Fancy Watkins to a sleepy little place like Marquis, Iowa, to be-
gin with.

As I mentioned, that year, 1903, pearl fever hit the Mississippi hard. It was an epidemic, all right, one that had been building for the last ten or fifteen years, ever since the Pecatonica River up Wisconsin way started giving up pearls. The fever had been spreading since. It got so farmers couldn't keep their hired hands come August when the river was low and the shell beds easier to get at. Then last year, up near Lansing, Iowa, two pearls was found that measured about an inch through the middle and went for fifty thousand dollars and sixty-five

thousand dollars respectively. All bets was off then. The stampede was on.

Whole towns sprang up out of nowhere, crowding the riverbanks. Whole families were out there pollywogging with their bare feet or crowfooting with hooks shaped like crowfeet that was dragged from boats. Johnboats, they was called. People were pulling up pocketbook clams and heel-splitter clams, buckthorns and spectacle-case, three-ridges and muskets, washboards and Higgins' eyes, warty-backs and ladyfingers, pig-toes and elk-toes, squaw foots and butterflies. You name it, that river seemed to have a clam shaped for it. There wasn't any shortage of clams, not back then anyway. And at the very least, a clammer could sell the shells to one of the pearl button factories that had been popping up everywhere since Bill McKinley, the Great White Father of American business, got tariffs slapped on salt-water shells.

But pearl buttons weren't the real reason people was breaking their backs over that river. The real reason was pearls. Freshwater pearls. Blue, green, salmon pink, and fiery black pearls. More precious than gold. Pearls. And it wouldn't have surprised me any if pearls was what Sheriff Huck was thinking about himself, seeing as how Fancy Watkins was a pearl buyer among other things.

Well, a couple of days slipped by, and we didn't hear nothing from Pearl Town. People gone clamming don't have much use for the law



unless it comes to them. The law takes time, and they're too busy prying open clams to have any of that to spare.

It was like the Wild West out in those clam towns, or at least that was what Sheriff Huck maintained. How he knew I'm not sure. The closest I ever saw him to the river was the day some kids brought a bucket of channel cats in to sell. So by the end of day two I'm figuring that, right or wrong, Pearl Town dispensed some home-made justice, which we would hear about later this fall, after freeze-up, when clamming was done for a spell. That would have suited the sheriff fine, I'm sure.

But come day three, Grocer Bootlins came acalling again, wiping his chin on the same red sleeve and looking sheepish about bothering us. "Folks out at Pearl Town were worrying that maybe you got lost," Ernest T. W. said.

"I'm touched," Sheriff Huck said, scratching the stubble on his chin, which I've noticed sometimes meant he was considering doing something. "But you can tell them not to worry. Every time I've ever gotten lost, it's always been my misfortune to get found." Then the sheriff went on the offensive. "I thought maybe you'd be bringing Fancy in today."

"Me?" Ernest T. W. said, shocked. "If people thought I was putting dead people in my boat, I'd be out of business. They wouldn't be trusting my vittles for nothing."

"People are squeamish," Sheriff Huck agreed. "But Fancy's remains aren't doing me much good where

they are. I need them in here, where my laboratory is."

It was a brilliant lie, I had to admit. At the same time that it allowed Sheriff Huck to duck his responsibilities, it also built up his reputation as a modern lawman. In 1903, with the start of the new century and all, almost everyone was crazy to be modern. And not many sheriffs in those parts could lay claim to a laboratory. Of course, Sheriff Huck couldn't either, not without considerable stretching of the facts. But he did have a shed out back of his place, a shed that he'd fixed up with a lantern and desk and pots and bottles and, last but not least, a medicine bag he'd won off a doctor passing through town. That was his laboratory. Mostly it was a place he went to get away from the pleasures of domesticity, as he put it. Did I mention there was a cot out there, too? Along with a few books, including the collected works of Mr. Samuel Langhorne Clemens, which the sheriff knew pretty much by heart, or pretended to.

To Ernest T. W. the sheriff now said, "You tell the citizens of Pearl Town that I'm as concerned as they are about justice in the matter of Fancy Watkins."

Which was probably true, considering the number of rascals, vagabonds, carpetbaggers, and fortune seekers residing out there.

"But," Sheriff Huck went on, and here's where I found out that he'd given the matter some serious thought since Ernest T. W.'s last visit, "I need to have you find out one other little thing for me before I



saddle up. I want you to find out where Fancy was found."

"Found?" Ernest T. W. said. "Why he was found facedown in the river."

"But which part of the river? Illinois side? Or Iowa? I don't want to go stepping on anyone's toes. And you know how big Sheriff Britches' toes are."

Sheriff Pericles Britches wore his badge across the river in Split Rock, Illinois, and he was a stickler when it came to doing everything by the book. It was a mighty thick book he consulted, too. He was Sheriff Huck's opposite in nearly every direction imaginable. If my sheriff had had any ambition whatsoever, the two of them would have had a high-noon draw-down long ago. As it was, Sheriff Huck was more than willing to defer to Sheriff Pericles whenever possible.

Grocer Ernest T. W. promised he'd look into it and get back to us.

"That'd be best," Sheriff Huck said. "Until we get this matter of jurisdiction straightened out, I guess we'd better leave Fancy right where he is."

After the grocer left, we sat a while without speaking. Then the sheriff let out a long sigh, the kind he usually reserved for Saturday afternoon, when he had all of Sunday staring him in the face. Sunday was a stay-at-home day unless there was some fiendish crime committed that required the sheriff to skip church and his mother-in-law's weekly visit. But if missing out on those pleasures was what it took to keep the streets of Marquis safe, he was willing to sacrifice himself.

In fact, he usually did his best law work on Sundays. After the sigh, he started scratching the stubble on his chin, and not too long after that he said, "Joe, I'm thinking you'd better round up Deputy Tom for me. I got a thing or two I need him to look into."

I didn't spring out of my seat right away, 'cause I could tell the sheriff wasn't done. Even though we'd hit a long pause, he was still scratching his chin.

"Maybe you'd better swing by the hotel, too," he said. "See how business is."

"Anything you want me to tell Tom?" I asked, knowing it wouldn't be easy to convince my fellow deputy of anything beyond the time of day and even that might bring on a headache. We butt heads, me and Deputy Tom.

"Just that I need him to go over to Daisy Charms'."

I was satisfied with that. Since Miss Daisy Charms was the usual reason behind Deputy Tom's drunk sprees, I figured he'd come without having to be wrestled any.

I found Deputy Tom sweeping out the general store, which was a job he had to supplement his deputy income, wages for law work being on the smallish side. As always, he was dressed in his Sunday clothes, which looked as though washed in a hog wallow. His hands weren't shaking too bad, though, so I judged he was as sober as he got. His qualifications for being a deputy matched up pretty well with mine. He was the only applicant whose name was Tom. But if



you're thinking his last name was Sawyer, you couldn't be more wrong. It was Reywas and before he became a deputy he was a riverboat man. One night he fell overboard and swam into Marquis. He'd been hanging around ever since.

"Sheriff's asking for you," I said.

"Got some desperados he wants hauled in?" Deputy Tom asked, thinking big as usual. Whenever he talks, you can't help but notice his front teeth, which have mostly gone missing.

"Not that I know of. Said something about sending you over to Miss Charms' for something or other."

Whenever mentioning Daisy Charms to Deputy Tom, you had best call her Miss Charms or put up your dukes. He had been hopelessly in love with the old jezebel since she first swept into town on a wave of flowery perfumes. His affection had been returned in bits and pieces, but never in its entirety, for Miss Charms wasn't a woman bound to any man beyond the hourglass beside her bed. Her situation only added to the romance for Deputy Tom, who referred to her as his damsel in distress, although how many damsels pack those dinky little guns amongst their lace was open for debate. He bolted for the jailhouse at the mention of her name, his broomstick clacking to the floor.

From the general store I crossed the sun-baked street to our one hotel, waiting outside until its proprietor came out to see what I wanted. It didn't take long. Having a redskin camped on his front steps

didn't set well with Wilhelm Hostlebloom's proprieties. Since I'm not a man to go where I'm not wanted, I didn't push it. I found out what I was after, namely whether any pearl buyers had checked out lately, maybe in a hurry, and headed back to tell Sheriff Huck that every pearl buyer at Hotel Hostlebloom was present and accounted for except for Fancy Watkins, who checked out a few days ago, writing his destination down as "Way Out West." As for the hotel's other guests, three were upriver on pearl buying trips but expected back soon.

Sheriff Huck digested all that for some minutes before saying, "Who's the three?"

"Raj Nabob, Sir Edmund Bridges, and Mr. Reginald Waters."

"How many buyers is putting up at the hotel just now?"

"Eighteen."

"Any of them bragging up any pearls they bought for next to nothing?"

The question probably didn't have much to do with our investigation. Sheriff Huck liked to dabble in buying and selling pearls himself. Everyone agreed the best way to make it rich was to be a pearl buyer, not a clammer. More dignity, less work, and the sheriff was all for that.

"No bragging," I said.

"Hmm."

Which could have meant almost anything or nothing. He hummed until Deputy Tom came busting in the door.

"Miss Charms has gone up to Pearl Town," he said in one long,



hurried breath. "You want me to go up there and ask her?"

"No need," Sheriff Huck said.

"Wouldn't bother me none at all," Deputy Tom said.

"Her being there tells us."

"What was it we wanted to know again?" Deputy Tom asked.

"If she'd dealt any big poker games that Fancy sat in on."

"Oh," Deputy Tom said, real disappointed like. Fancy's business relations with Miss Charms turned Deputy Tom's eyes green same as always.

"Boys," Sheriff Huck said with a yawn. "I guess we better call it a day. Supper's probably waiting."

And he headed out of the jail-house like a man the governor just told no. Deputy Tom almost waited till the count of ten before taking off himself. He headed straight down to the levee to commandeer a skiff and row upriver to Pearl Town. I'd have gone and warned the sheriff except that I figured the sheriff had a pretty good idea that was what would happen anyway.

A couple more days drifted by, with no word from Deputy Tom or anybody else either. I stuck pretty close by the sheriff, not wanting to miss out on anything. Pretty soon grocer Ernest T. W. Bootlins came visiting again.

"Your deputy's gone and arrested half of Pearl Town," Ernest T. W. said.

"Not in any official capacity, I hope," said Sheriff Huck, which threw Ernest T. W. but was a maneuver I'd seen applied before. How could a sworn deputy do something

that wasn't in an official capacity? But that was the way Sheriff Huck played it. That way he always had someone handy to put the blame on. Over the years Deputy Tom had proved about as handy as you can get for the purpose of blaming.

"Well, he was wearing a badge," Ernest T. W. said:

"Next time you're up there, you can tell those people that I haven't sanctioned any arrests. What's he saying they did?"

"Killed Fancy Watkins for a pearl."

Sheriff Huck's eyebrow raised a notch with that news.

"So where's he keeping all these criminals anyhow?"

"Oh well, he lets 'em have the run of the place. House arrest, he calls it."

"Anybody try to skedaddle since Deputy Tom had this spurt of ambition?"

"Not likely. Not the way everyone's keeping an eye on everyone else up there."

"Oh, they're looking out for each other, are they?"

"And that pearl missing off Fancy."

"Do tell?" Sheriff Huck said, his eyebrows fluttering a tiny bit more.

"They wanted me to tell you that Fancy was found floating right in the middle of Fishfly Slough."

"Who's this 'they'?"

"A majority of those what voted on it."

"Close vote?"

"Not even. Pretty much unanimous."

What all that meant was that nobody in their right mind wanted



Sheriff Pericles Britches handling the investigation. Pericles wouldn't cut any deals of any kind. Sheriff Huck, on the other hand, was a man you could get comfortable with if you had something that maybe wasn't yours but once belonged to a dead man.

If you haven't heard of pearl fever before, maybe I should take a pause here to explain that it was as catching as gold fever, only worse. People with pearl fever usually felt as though they'd been cheated out of the Klondike and California and Cripple Creek gold rushes, and that these pearls might be their last chance to end up sitting as pretty as a king.

When these people first heard about a pearl big enough to knock out your eye, their original impulse was usually to go and dig up a ton or two of clams and find a pearl of their own. After that first ton or two, reality began to set in.

Maybe one out of ten thousand clams has a pearl in it, and most of those are misshapen little things that look like gobs of rock candy. Baroques is the name for those gobs. Hardly any pearls are perfectly round and worth a fortune. And when that reality hooked up with the finding of a pearl worth a king's ransom, well, human nature being undependable as it is, the footing can get mighty treacherous no matter where you're standing. People are bound to do almost anything in the grip of pearl fever.

"So the whole town found him at once?" the sheriff said.

"I guess."

Which I took to mean that Er-

nest T. W. had been bit by the fever himself.

"I thought you said Musky found him."

"Oh, he did. He voted middle of the slough, too."

"Anybody see this pearl before Fancy went floating?"

"Oh yes. You know Fancy. Pretty much the whole town had a look."

"Better describe it for me."

"'Bout marble size, they say. Red as blood. Not a flaw to it."

That pretty much did it. Sheriff Huck stood up.

"Ernest T. W., you better give me a ride up there before somebody else goes floating."

"Fraid I'm heading downriver, sheriff"

"Not any more you're not. If Fancy is in my jurisdiction, then I'm thinking I'd better get up there pronto."

Now that he'd heard about this pearl, I guess pronto meant seven days after Fancy was found. But there was no way in Hades that Sheriff Huck was going to Pearl Town in a rowboat, not when there was a perfectly good steam-powered chugger could take him.

So we chugged five miles up the river past Beef Creek and Sheepgut Slough and No-Name Island till we got to Fishfly Slough. Ernest T. W. knew the waters and avoided the sandbars and hull inspectors, otherwise known as sunken trees, as easy as a cat. The river was low and slow and smelling like something that couldn't make up its mind whether to die or not.

We passed a steamboat heading



downstream with passengers who stood around the railing jawing. We passed dozens of the flat-bottomed johnboats that clammers used. All were dragging crowfeet over shell beds.

Clams sit on the bottom sifting water through their open slits, and if something brushes over them, they latch on and never let go. The clammers pulled 'em up, shucked 'em off the hooks, and dropped the hooks back in the water.

Boats we passed were heaped with shells. They all took a minute to wave and try and see who Ernest T. W.'s passengers were, but Sheriff Huck stayed put under the canvas awning, snoozing under a jacket he'd pulled over his face. The deer flies were feeling real amorous that day. All the pretty river and swooping eagles and frisking otters in the world didn't mean a thing to Sheriff Huck, not when he was on a case and had to conserve his energy.

We pulled into Pearl Town in the late afternoon. I could smell it quite a while before I could see it. There was something about several tons of river clams being boiled in open vats that made you forget every bouquet of pansies that had ever touched your nose. You steam the clams to open them up, and once they are open, you run a finger inside to feel for pearls. Finding none, you pull out the inside and toss the shell on the pile headed to a button factory. And that was the story of a clammer's life, almost all the time. But not always.

Every once in a while a clammer feels something hard inside a clam that makes his or her in-

testines feel like they are trying to straighten out. You handle a clam nice and easy when this happens. Don't want to drop it. Don't want to lose it. Don't want to let out a whoop 'cause that will attract attention, which is the last thing you want. If it turns out to be the genuine article, 'most everyone says the best thing you can do is pop it in your mouth. With your mouth full, you won't be liable to tell anyone you have it, which is for the best. Otherwise you'll have more friends than mangy dogs have fleabites.

So we rounded the last bend, and there was Pearl Town steaming and stinking away on the riverbank. There were a couple of hand-fuls of crooked shacks that looked like a good puff of wind might level 'em. There were a few boats but not as many as there would be later, when the whole fleet was in. There were dogs barking and crows working over the shell piles, and though you couldn't hear it, you knew there was a buzz of flies awaiting for you, too.

Ernest T. W. put in at the far end of town, as far removed from all the smells as he could manage, and dropped a plank to shore. Not counting kids, there were fifteen or twenty people standing around watching us. Mostly the grownups were women or oldtimers holding crutches and ear trumpets. There were three men in suitcoats—pearl buyers. They had that dead serious look about them that always reminds me of a turkey vulture come home to roost.

Deputy Tom was nowhere in

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sight, but that didn't surprise us. Miss Daisy Charms' skiff was lined up with all the others. There were lace curtains fluttering out of the cabin she had mounted atop her boat. A large brass washtub, for her friends, was on shore in front of it. Right next to the tub stood a freshly chopped stack of firewood.

"Where's Fancy?" Sheriff Huck asked.

A stout woman in coveralls pointed the shovel she was holding toward a raggedy blanket-tent a bit removed from town. Sheriff Huck thanked her for the information and headed the opposite direction, walking till he found a little grass rise that was upwind and in the shade of some cottonwoods.

Plunking himself down, he said to me, "Joe, you best ask around. Anybody seems to know anything, send 'em up to me. Be picky. They're all going to figure they know who did in Fancy, so you can skip that line of questioning. Concentrate on who's on the outs and if there's anyone been acting strange, that kind of thing."

"What kind of strange?" I asked.

"Short of foaming at the mouth, hard to say. Anything out of the ordinary. But don't tip your hand on that. We don't want 'em jumping to conclusions. That's our job."

At which point the sheriff gave me one of his vote-getting smiles, so I knew he was making one of his jokes.

I have to admit the idea of Sheriff Huck Finn summoning up the energy to jump to anything was pretty funny, but I never let on that I thought so. Deep down the sher-

iff considered himself a man of action.

"Anything else?" I asked.

"If Deputy Tom is done interrogating Miss Charms, tell him to report in."

"Yessir."

The sheriff felt pretty low whenever I yessirred him, and he asked if there was something stuck in my craw. I wasn't about to tell him that my grandfather, Moses Two-shot, used to bring me fishing here when I was a boy. Back then there wasn't anything but trees, marsh grass, water, and an old Indian named Fox-eyes who shared his smoked fish and told great ghost stories. I didn't say anything about that, though. I didn't say anything at all, which to his credit was an answer that Sheriff Huck tended to respect.

"I saw some melon patches," the sheriff said.

Meaning, get him one.

"Yessir."

Two yessirs was almost more than he could bear, and he waved me off. But I barely got five steps before he called out, "Better send those pearl buyers up here. One at a time." I paused, didn't turn. "Wouldn't hurt to check on Fancy either, just to make sure," the sheriff added. "And Joe, this pearl that's gone missing—don't be asking about it."

Now that was a strategy I had to admire, and one that led me to suspect the sheriff really had spent some time out West among my red brethren. I've never caught anything by walking right up to it, not in this life. I skipped over any more yessirs and headed on back to Pearl



Town, taking deep breaths of fresh air while I could.

The three pearl buyers were busy loading their satchels into Michael One-ear's skiff. I didn't take that as a sign of guilt so much as a sign they'd given up on getting what they came after, namely Fancy's pearl. For them to hang around Pearl Town for up to seven days, which by my count was how long since Fancy went swimming, meant they must have caught a whiff of something special.

As a rule pearl buyers didn't leave the comforts of town or spend their time with clammers, who were about all that was left of the frontier in these parts. Clammers smelled as fresh as the frontier, cursed as hard as the frontier, and were prone to take matters into their own hands as fast as the frontier. Pearl buyers, on the other hand, sat around gassing about wealthy friends in coal, steamboat trips across the Atlantic, and French chefs in Philadelphia. Sheriff Huck referred to them as a pack of winged hyenas, and I thought he was being charitable.

"We didn't get up here until two days after Fancy's unfortunate accident."

Mr. Reginald Waters volunteered this before I could ask a thing. He was a little taller than a butter churn and as soft as the butter inside the churn. He sweated like cheese, smelled of rose water. He took to being called "mister" right after Edmund Bridges hit town with his title of "sir". Like most

pearl buyers, he packed one of those dinky derringers up a sleeve for protection. You could see its eye peeking out every time he wiped his brow. I couldn't help but duck whenever he waved that arm around, which gave our conversation a sort of seesawing motion.

"Come out here right after you talked to the grocer?" I asked, figuring Ernest T. W. got paid for tips.

"Indeed."

"Know anything about what Fancy was doing up here?"

"Conducting business," Raj Nabob answered in English that was a whole lot prettier than mine. He wore a turban and a highnecked jacket with a coat of arms that he claimed belonged to the Maharajah Punjabi, his sponsor. I'd known him from before he'd gotten into the pearl game, when neither of us was living in Marquis. His name was Chief Half Moon at that time, and he was traveling with a Wild West show as a tomahawk thrower. I've no idea which part of him was a lie, the East Indian or the West Indian, and figured it didn't really matter. Like the sheriff was prone to say, the truth hardly ever sat still.

"Anybody see him up here alive?" I asked, figuring it wasn't worth going into Fancy's business with three sharpies like these.

"My good man," said Sir Edmund Bridges, "only half the populace."

Sir Edmund's whiskers could have been stole from a billy goat. He dressed like he once owned a funeral parlor, all the way up to a black stovepipe hat that added a good ten inches to his already high head. Like 'most everything bad





about Marquis, Iowa, he showed up one day on a steamboat.

"Why only half?" I asked. Fancy wasn't the kind of man people missed if he was about.

"My good man," Sir Edmund said, "the other half would have been busy grubbing after clams."

"I suppose," I said, looking Sir Edmund in the eye, "that all of you have someone who can vouch for your whereabouts seven nights ago?"

They all allowed they did. Each other.

"Too bad," I said. "The sheriff's ears get to twitching when all his suspects start to standing up for each other. By the way, he wants to talk to you, up by those cottonwoods."

That caused some bellyaching and muttering, but they headed up there just the same. I let 'em get about a dozen steps before adding, "One at a time, please."

They all exchanged glances, what you might call murderous glances, or at least none-too-trusting glances, and then they started to arguing about who'd go first. In that crowd of three there weren't none willing to go last. I left them bickering and started on through camp.

Before long I was leading quite a parade. First behind me were the mongrel dogs followed by the mongrel kids; bringing up the rear were the mongrel crippled and weak of mind. Not a pedigree in town. It was a real democratic operation.

Down by the river's edge were tubs with fires smoldering under them. They were close to the river to save steps on hauling shells. Far-

ther away were the shacks, built of split logs and flour sacks and branches. Behind the shacks was Pearl Town's main street, a sandy path that cut through brush and had a lot of chicken traffic. Wash water flew over it from time to time, pitched out front doors.

I didn't get to ask many questions. That was because every kid behind me was firing questions at me faster than I could return fire.

"There going to be a hanging?"

"Caught who done it yet?"

"You really carry a snakeskin around your neck?"

When I turned to face them, everyone got as quiet as sunrise. There were about six kids dogging me, though it was hard to get a fix on them with all the fidgeting. They were dirty enough for twelve, which was an amazing thing considering that they lived next door to a river, but as one of them explained, they'd spent the morning digging for where Fancy's treasure was hid. When I asked what kind of treasure that might be, they got kind of vague and nervous, mumbling about emeralds and rubies and the usual truck that riverboat gamblers carried around.

"I see," I said. "Well, Sheriff Huck's going to need some help with this one, so I'm authorized to deputize all of you on the spot." Six sets of eyes bugged as big as turkey eggs. "All right then," I said after I'd sworn them in, "which of you deputies can tell me where the card game was?"

All my deputies got as quiet as quail about to be flushed, so I knew they'd been warned real strong not



to say a word about any card games, probably because they had a relative who'd lost money to Fancy at some time or another. Everybody lost to Fancy. He cheated.

"Forget that," I said at last, "here's what I want you to do. Fan out and look for clues. You find anything suspicious, take it to the sheriff."

I felt right proud of myself for sickening them on the sheriff in his leisure. They vanished as quick as jackrabbits, leaving me with the dogs and the lame and feeble. There was also one face left behind that it took me a minute to recognize. That was because of the kerchief tied around his head to cut down on a toothache. It was Grubworm McGraw, which surprised me some because I didn't remember him having any teeth left in his head to go sour. But there he stood, cheek bulging as hard as a rock and in bad need of being lanced before the poison got to his brain. I hate to take advantage of a man who's feeling pain, but I didn't see any way around it.

"Grubworm," I said, stepping toward him without getting too close. When sober, he wasn't a half-bad pickpocket. "Where was the card game?"

He started to shake his head, but I cut him off. "You don't tell me now, I'll have to take you up to the sheriff. We both know how he loves to go on."

Grubworm's eyes got as big as my pint-sized deputies' had been as he shook his head no, no, no, indicating he wasn't in any state to tolerate one of Sheriff Huck's long-

winded spreeds. But I nodded my head yes, yes, yes until he gave up and mumbled through his wrapped jaw, "There."

He was pointing toward the very stand of cottonwood trees that Sheriff Huck was camped beneath. Sometimes I almost believed the sheriff had stepped out of the pages of a book, considering the number of coincidences he attracted.

"Much obliged," I said. "Now, if you could just point me toward Preacher Good's tent..."

But Grubworm made a break for it at the mention of Preacher Good. I can't say that I blamed him. Preacher Isabelle Good had been baptizing the needy up and down the river for months, striking fear into the hearts of sinners and saved alike. She was one righteous woman. In the end it was Woods Bjorkland who led me to the good preacher. Ever since Woods lost his feet when a steam boiler he was feeding blew, he's known no fear of God or man. It was slow walking, what with Woods' feet now being made of pure mahogany, but the pace didn't bother me. It even gave me a chance to slip in a question or two that I figured Woods was the best man to answer.

"How's things been going out here?"

"Terrible," said Woods, who saw thunderclouds and sinkholes everywhere he turned. "Just plain terrible. Nobody's getting along with nobody."

All the way to Preacher Good's he brought me up to date on who was two-timing who and who was thieving from who and who was threat-

ening to burn out who. If mankind was anywhere near as wicked as Woods Bjorkland hoped, we all deserved to be stranded on a bald mountaintop in a lightning storm.

"Sounds pretty routine to me," I said, taking on the air of a worldly lawman.

"Routine! We got a dead man bobbing away on our doorstep and you call that routine?"

"I'd call that an aberration," I said. "I ain't heard of no other bloodshed out this way all summer."

"What do you call that knife fight that Little Bit Kettle and Jimmy O'Leary got into?"

"Hadn't heard about it," I said. Or at least not much.

"And how about what Luke DeWitt and his missus did to each other?"

"Again?"

"Yup," Woods said with satisfaction. "And we had a back-stabbing not more than two weeks ago that was something to behold."

"Who was in that one?"

"Strangers. We bandaged 'em up and sent 'em packing. Told them they better keep on being strangers in these parts."

"Anybody get into it with Fancy?"

"On a regular basis? Or just once or twice?"

So I let Woods ramble on, listening to him name every able-bodied man in Pearl Town, plus half the women, as having possible reasons—strong ones, too—for seeing if Fancy Watkins could float when loaded up with lead and axe. About the only person he left off his list was himself, which struck me as odd: Woods wasn't one to shrink

from telling his accomplishments. I made a note to comment to Sheriff Huck about it.

When we reached Preacher Good's tent, Woods did his best to step inside with me, but the preacher wasn't having it and wisely sent him on his way. We wouldn't have been able to talk freely otherwise. Woods Bjorkland was the worst gossip thereabouts, stretching everything two or three times its original size.

There were several things to note about Preacher Good. First off, being a woman in a man's field never slowed her down any. Truth be revealed, I think it fueled her lofty aims. Second, she was a handsome woman, with honey-blond hair you sort of wanted to touch, steady blue eyes that always looked as though they'd recently seen heaven, and a figure that had attracted a sinner or two to her sermons. Third, as near as I could tell, there wasn't a thought in her head that didn't have something to do with improving the plight of her flock. I've never met a person who sounded so chock-full of goodness and unselfishness and a whole bunch of other desirable traits. And that's why I went to her now. She was the only one in Pearl Town I trusted for the truth.

She got rid of Woods by sweetly asking if he'd had a chance to think over what they'd last talked about. Woods went limping away as fast as his mahogany feet could carry him. "Ask him to join your flock?" I said, sort of wishing she'd ask me.

"He appears to need more time to think it over," she said.



I forgot to mention her voice: sweet and sort of distracted-sounding, as though she were trying to listen to the Lord and you at the same time.

"Did you ask him before or after he got into that scrap with Fancy Watkins?" I said, checking up on Woods' omission of himself from the suspect list.

"Oh, before. But you'd be mistaken to think that Woods Bjorkland had anything to do with Mr. Watkins' going on ahead of us."

"I would?"

"Oh yes. How could Woods Bjorkland ever sneak up on anyone? His feet creak with every step he takes."

"Maybe he oiled 'em."

"You're fishing in the wrong hole, deputy. And might I add, there's nobody in my flock responsible for Fancy's hearing the final trumpeter either."

Since the number of souls in Preacher Good's flock fluctuated between three and five, depending on what she was serving for dinner after the sermon, this didn't clear many people. The main reason the preacher stayed on at Pearl Town was her belief that the good Lord intended for her ministry to receive a giant pearl that, in her words, would "shine like an archangel's beacon." She rarely got through a sermon without mentioning that pearl, and she had to be the only preacher in creation who accepted clamshells—unopened ones—in the collection plate. With the proceeds of this pearl the Lord was sending her, she intended to set sail for the city of Tombstone, Arizona, where she'd heard God's word was

spreading even slower than in Pearl Town.

"Could you tell me exactly what did happen up here?"

"I shall," she said, taking a moment to compose herself.

She smoothed her skirt and rearranged a hairpin as she assembled her facts. "Last Saturday Mr. Thaddeus Benford had the light of Providence shine a powerful beam down on him. He found a shell that held a pearl the size of a sparrow egg, perfectly round and colored the slightest flush of lilac violet."

"I see."

"Mr. Benford is a regular member of my flock," she stated. "And I do believe that he was bound to have dropped that pearl in my collection plate the very next day if temptation hadn't stepped forward in the form of Mr. Fancy Watkins."

"Poker game?"

"And liquor."

"Know anything about who was in this game?"

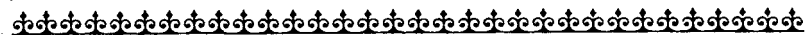
"Mr. Fancy Watkins, of course. He brought the cards. And those other three pearl buyers that he travels with were in, too."

So they'd been out to Pearl Town twice but acting as if only once. Well, that in itself was nothing new for a pearl buyer.

"Any others?"

"Mr. Ernest T. W. Bootlins, the grocer, and that creature from the flower boat was involved. I fear that Mr. Thaddeus Benford was the guest of honor."

"I guess 'most everyone else was watching?" I said, knowing that the game was held outside where there was plenty of elbow room.



I took her blush to mean yes. Lifting her chin, she went on in an avenging voice. "It didn't take long for Mr. Watkins, amidst claims of cheating, I might add, to claim all the money and pearls in the game. Everything ended in animosity."

"There was a fight?"

"Several," she said, choosing her words carefully. "But none involving Thaddeus. As for Mr. Watkins, he left the game on the arm of that creature."

"Gunshots in the night?"

"No more than usual," she said after a moment of closed-eye consideration. "People around here have the quaint custom of waiting until morning to see if the good Lord saw fit for anything to be hit."

"I guess he saw fit," I said.

"That's not for me to say," the preacher said respectfully. "But in the morning Musky found Mr. Watkins in the slough. And that, sir, is all I know on the subject of the poker game."

"I haven't seen Thaddeus hereabouts," I said.

"Gone back to his farm, I fear. That kind and gentle man was in need of time and privacy so he might understand the temptations and evils that have befallen him."

Thanking the preacher for her time, I tore a pearl button off my vest and dropped it in her collection plate on the way out of her tent. From behind me I heard an amen almost sweet enough to make me sign up for a baptism on the spot.

The flower boat and the creature who owned it were my next stop. The boat wasn't much different

from every other johnboat except for the cabin top and the way it smelled. From the end of its gangplank a wave of roses and petunias and lilies of the valley put up an awfully stiff head wind. I called out hello, sort of soft-like, but got no answer. As lightfooted as possible I slipped on board and pretty soon spied Miss Daisy Charms and Deputy Tom in what might be called a compromising position.

They were on their hands and knees prying up the floorboards of the cabin. Searching for something lost, if I wasn't mistaken. From the looks of things, they'd already torn apart everything else in the cabin.

At least they were clothed, sort of. Although I'm duty bound to report that Deputy Tom's union suit was unbuttoned in back and Miss Charms' whalebone was in need of some tightening.

The next thing noticeable about them was their hair. Deputy Tom's had been tousled until it looked like a bird's nest. His bald spot made a perfect egg. Miss Charms' golden wig was all curls and loops and ribbons, and sort of cobwebby on the edges, seen in a shaft of sunlight as it was.

Deputy Tom was in his fifties but still had a boyish, caught-in-the-jam-jar look about him. Miss Daisy Charms matched him year for year and was a wonder of lotions and makeup built up around a pair of eyes that could dig all the way to your pocketbook. She had a figure that belonged on the prow of a pirate ship.

She and Deputy Tom had run off together a couple of times but al-



ways landed back in Marquis, Iowa, for what the deputy called sentimental reasons but which Miss Charms claimed boiled down to money.

"There's got to be more than a marble in his pocket," Deputy Tom insisted.

"I tell you we've looked everywhere, just everywhere."

I let them pry two or three more boards up before I backed off a few steps and cleared my throat to announce myself. This time when I called out hello, Miss Charms told me to come on ahead. I found the two of them sitting on chairs that were stripped of cushions. Deputy Tom's foot was in Miss Charms' lap, getting the massage of its life. They both acted pleased to see me, which required some real stage talent on Deputy Tom's part.

"Come in, come in," Miss Charms said. "There's always room for another man of the law."

"Thank you, ma'am, but I've just a minute. Deputy Tom," I said, for we always address each other formally, even in private, "the sheriff's asking to see you."

"Why, thank you for the message, Deputy Joe," he said.

The truth is, me and Deputy Tom can't stand each other.

"Miss Charms," I said, taking my hat in my hands to show how respectful I was, "rumor has it you were the last person to see Fancy Watkins alive."

"Hardly the last," she answered softly, "or I'd be the murderer."

"I've already questioned her about this," Deputy Tom said. "And the truth of the matter is Fancy

Watkins went for a little midnight dip to clear his head. That was the last Miss Charms saw of him. And there is the proof of it, right over there."

Deputy Tom pointed to a pair of pants and suitcoat and boots that could only have belonged to Fancy. Nobody owned a finer set of clothes than he. Wherever he'd gone from Miss Charms', he hadn't come back for his clothes.

"I'll tell the sheriff you'll be along directly," I said.

They were back to ripping floorboards before I hit shore.

I'd pretty much finished up my investigating duties except for paying my respects to Fancy, which I'd been saving for last. A part of me had no doubt been hoping it was a trip I wouldn't have to make. I've always felt kind of strange looking at dead bodies unless it happens to be the body of a relative, in which case I don't seem to really believe they're dead but just going on ahead a ways. But when the body belongs to someone else, well, I always feel like I'm spying on something too private for even a lawman to see.

To make matters worse, I still owed Fancy a double-eagle that I'd lost to him several months back. He was the smoothest cheater I'd ever seen, and like a fool I kept playing out my hands, not because I expected to win but because I was amazed at how he could keep cheating without being caught. Whenever we met after that, he always tipped his Stetson to me real politely and never mentioned a





thing. We both knew he was waiting to call that marker due some special day. It looked like that day had arrived.

Fancy's remains were kept at Musky's tent partly because Musky found 'em, and partly because no one else wanted 'em. Since Musky was an ex-slave, his tent was set off from everybody else's. I don't know if that was Musky's choice or the town's choice, but that's the way it worked. The fact that his tent wasn't close to Pearl Town was another reason to leave Fancy up there as he got riper and riper.

From a distance of twenty feet Fancy smelled as strong as a herd of buffalo must have. I suppose folks figured the stink wouldn't bother Musky any, seeing as how he smelled pretty powerful himself, and there were no doubt some folks who didn't care if it bothered him. The reason old Musky smelled so fulsome was a necklace of garlic and crayfish claws around his neck that came from his Choctaw grandmother. Aside from that necklace, Musky was about as clean as a clammer can get, which wasn't exactly sparkling.

When I called out his name, he appeared from beneath a shade tree upwind of his tent. He was a small, bent-over man, which was how you started to look if you pulled clams out of the Mississippi for any length of time. His head was as round and handsome as an Osage orange, his short hair was gray, his color was red-black in the sun. He dressed like 'most any clammer, in trousers, shirt, and one of those hats that has lost its shape

to the sun and rain and sleet and hail and whatever else might choose to fall out of the sky. He never talked much. When he did talk, it sounded like he was hiccupping between every third or fourth word. That was because his gums smacked with his every breath.

"I come to see Fancy," I said.

He pointed toward the tent and followed me in, but not before pulling a bandanna up over his nose. I was wishing I had one, too, and breathed through my mouth accordingly.

A burlap bag covered Fancy, and I peeled it back. Like everyone said, there was a hole between Fancy's eyes and a tomahawk stuck square in his back. The tomahawk wasn't an Indian thing but a store-bought thing, what the general store would have called an axe, which didn't rule out the possibility that an Indian had planted it. And like Miss Charms said, he was naked all the way down to his toes. Turning some unusual colors, too, but still recognizable as Fancy Watkins, ladies' man, card cheat, and pearl buyer all rolled into one.

Musky and I stepped back outside with a real quick step.

"Where'd you find him?" I asked.

"'Bout five, six boat lengths out in the slough."

"Closest to who?"

"Straight out from where Michael One-ear's skiff had been."

"What's the current like there?"

"Kind of lazy. Circles some."

"Had Michael taken them pearl-ers back to town already?"

"Sure enough. They left right after the big poker game shut down



the night before and Fancy walked off with a pearl the size of a turkey egg."

"That pearl keeps growing and growing."

"Plant 'em in a story, they're bound to."

"Anything else to add?"

"I'd like to get Mr. Fancy moved into the ground as soon as possible."

"I'll tell the sheriff," I said. "Thanks for the tour."

"Don't you want to know if I done it?" Musky said, touching my arm before I could go.

"Did you?"

"Thanks for asking," Musky said, heading back to his shade tree.

I guess he figured he ought to be under suspicion same as everyone else, this being a free country and all. But if there was one thing to say about Sheriff Huck, it was this: he might be as lazy as a hound's shadow, but he didn't allow no railroad-ing of people 'cause of the color of their skin. There were places not too far away where the same couldn't be said. There were places where an ex-slave finding a dead man was proof enough that the ex-slave made him dead. Not here, though, and either Musky knew it or else he had more starch in him than the rest of Pearl Town put together.

So I headed back up to the cottonwoods where Sheriff Huck was probably taking a nap. On the way I plucked a melon. I had me a pretty solid idea who'd done in Fancy, but I intended to keep it to myself. One of the wages of working for Sheriff Huck was that it was al-

ways a wonder to see how his mind worked. He was sort of like a mole, tunneling along beneath everything and then popping up to the surface at exactly the right spot. I was always amazed when he did it and always secretly hoping that the next time he popped up he would get everything wrong.

This time, like nearly every other time, the sheriff wasn't where I expected him to be. Instead of napping, he was entertaining the entire citizenry of Pearl Town with the story of how he had once stopped a circuit judge named Thatcher from sentencing the wrong sow. It was a long story and a good one, even if all the judges in the sheriff's stories were named Thatcher.

While waiting, I counted heads. The only one I found missing was Musky's, and when the wind shifted slightly, I caught a scent of garlic and found him standing not twenty feet behind me, chuckling at the sheriff's pig story same as everyone else.

Once the sheriff was finished saving the sow, I stepped forward, still holding the melon under my arm.

"Hope you paid for that, deputy," said the sheriff, which got a guffaw out of nearly everyone but the three pearl buyers, who stood off by themselves looking like time was money and this kind of folderol was what kept most men poor. I let the tittering die away before saying, "I done what you asked, sheriff."

"Find anything out?"

"Some."

"Care to share?"

With twenty or thirty people



looking on, my pride got the better of me, and I couldn't resist showing off a bit.

"I'd say there's four people what done in Fancy, and they're all standing right here."

For an opening line, I had everyone's attention, all right.

"Don't keep us in suspense, deputy," said Sheriff Huck, taking the melon and slicing it open with his whittling knife. The inside was all pink-red and the seeds mostly white. "Lay it all out."

So I described everything I'd found out. Murmurs of approval rose from the crowd whenever someone heard something he or she knew to be true. A gasp or two could be heard now and then when I caught someone off guard. The sheriff nodded that he was following me just fine. As he nodded, he started slicing off pieces of melon and handing them out to those nearest. The junior deputies I'd sworn in each took one, acting like they'd just been knighted. Grubworm McGraw reached for one until he remembered how sore his mouth was and pulled his hand back. Preacher Good handed hers off to Ernest T. W. Bootlins, who sort of nibbled on it while trying to watch his boat and its goods, which were maybe fifty yards up the shore and wide open to pilfering. Deputy Tom, with some clothes on now, handed his piece to Miss Charms, who tucked into it and spit out seeds without a worry about whether she looked ladylike. Woods Bjorkland offered a piece to Sir Edmund Bridges and Mr. Reginald Waters and Raj Nabob, who all

turned their noses up at it. Michael One-ear bit into his as if it had wings and might fly away. Even Musky got a piece handed back to him. Which left one piece, and since I'd never known Sheriff Huck to short himself, I kept right on talking without putting my hand out.

I told everyone how Fancy and Miss Charms left the poker game together, which got a round of "that's so" from the crowd, and how later that night Fancy felt a mite warm and decided to take a dip in the river to cool off.

"Well, it is August!" Miss Charms said.

Everyone but Preacher Good snickered.

I went on to describe how Fancy was discovered the next morning by Musky, who was headed out to the channel to clam.

"And those are the facts," I said, wrapping it up.

"You rounded 'em up right good," Sheriff Huck said. "Care to do anything with 'em?"

"I'd say it's pretty simple," I said, puffing up a little earlier than I should have. "Whoever killed Fancy used the axe first, then the der-ringer."

"One wasn't enough?" the sheriff asked.

"He wouldn't have been sitting still," I explained. "Not Fancy. So the axe brought him down. The der-ringer finished him off."

"Makes sense," Sheriff Huck said. "So he went for a swim, got hauled out of the water by somebody laying for him, and was robbed of his pearl. That the way you're seeing it?"

"Yes, sir, it is."



"And I suppose you've got someone to point a finger at?"

"I do."

And I pointed at the three pearl buyers.

"Everyone knows that pearl buyers carry derringers," I said. "What you may not know is that Raj Nabob used to travel in the Major Reno Wild West Show under the name of Chief Half Moon, tomahawk thrower extraordinary."

That news shocked everyone including Sir Edmund Bridges and Mr. Reginald Waters, who backed away from their associate as if they'd been robbed and murdered themselves. But all this was short-lived 'cause the sheriff called out for order, saying we hadn't ought to get out a rope just yet.

"There's one tiny problem with your line of deduction, Joe." And here he paused to get people hanging on his every word. "What about the pearl?"

"They took it," I said.

"How? Wasn't Fancy skinny-dipping? So he wouldn't have had it on him."

A ripple of agreement went through the crowd; everyone thought the sheriff had punctured my balloon right neat. But I'd seen this one acoming and for once was ready to trump him.

"Well," I said, dragging it out so's I had everyone hanging on my next words, "they had an accomplice."

"Do tell," Sheriff Huck said, pleased that I was rising to the challenge.

"The one who was back where Fancy Watkins left his clothes was in cahoots with 'em. For it was in

those clothes where the pearl would have been."

Everyone spun toward Miss Daisy Charms to see how she would answer this, but she didn't have to say a thing. Deputy Tom leaped to her defense.

"Now, just a dang-blamed minute! I've been conducting my own investigations into these matters, and I can tell you that up to a point Deputy Joe got it right, but when he gets to Miss Charms, he's got it all wrong."

"Tell us what you got," Sheriff Huck said, scratching his chin considerable as he said it.

"Well, he's right about these pearl buyers chopping Fancy down and shooting him up. But what he couldn't have any way of knowing was that the pearl wasn't back in Fancy's clothes but hidden aboard Ernest T. W. Bootlins' grocery boat. Fancy made a short stop there on the way back to Miss Charms, claiming he needed a bedtime snack but really looking for a place to stash the pearl he'd won. The ones who knew he made this stop were the three polecats, otherwise known as pearl buyers, who were skulking along after him. They dug the pearl out from where Fancy hid it and then did away with him so he wouldn't be around to squawk. And that's the way it happened."

Deputy Tom crossed his arms and gave an awful proud nod to show he was done.

That got everyone in the crowd to arguing and jabbering all at once. They was also casting glances toward Ernest T. W., as if he might



know what happened to the pearl. The only way to quiet everyone down was for the sheriff to pull out his pistolla and take a shot at the sky. That got everyone looking just where the sheriff wanted—right at him.

"This has all been entertaining," Sheriff Huck called out. "But now, if everyone will settle themselves down, I'll tell you what actually happened; and then you can head home without worrying about this pearl that none of us can stop thinking about. Myself included."

That got everyone to leaning as far forward as they could manage without toppling over, me right along with them.

Of course, as soon as the sheriff had everyone's attention, he settled back down, making himself comfortable.

"The problem with the way everyone's been thinking about old Fancy's demise is that none of us could get our minds off that pearl. I'm no different from the rest of you, and it threw me off track of what actually happened, too. I'll admit it fair and square. But then my deputy enlisted the help of several young deputies, who found evidence that took the blinders off my eyes. Finally I seen what had been before us all along.

"This here murder doesn't have much of anything to do with a pearl big enough to choke on. What it's all about is the human heart. Anytime you find a dead man with his clothes off it's almost always got to come down to the heart, not finances, and that's a fact we'd all do well to remember."

Here the sheriff took a small nip from the flask he carried on his hip, the one filled with patented rheumatism medicine fit to pickle a fish, bones and all. I kept my eyes on the edge of crowd in case anybody got an urge to wander off.

"Boys," the sheriff said at last, "bring up that evidence."

That was when the boys I'd deputized ran down the riverbank and, holding two long branches, dragged a couple of dripping-wet items up from the slough. One was a book, the other looked like a fur of some kind.

"What we have here," Sheriff Huck went on, "is two prize possessions whose owners would have never tossed them into the river, not for a thousand dollars. But the river's where my deputies found 'em. First we got us a genuine human hair wig, come all the way up from St. Louis." The boys held the fur piece up for our inspection. "Tag says it was made in Charleston. Any woman wearing a head of hair like this is bound to turn a man's head, wouldn't you say, Miss Charms?"

Once again, everyone's head snapped toward Miss Daisy Charms, who smiled and said, "I'd say it takes more than hair to do that, sheriff."

Which got a chuckle from 'most everyone, Sheriff Huck included. But right away he got back to telling his story.

"I couldn't for the life of me figure out how an expensive wig like that had ended up in the soup, so I sent the boys back to look some more. And while they were gone, I gave it



some serious thought. About all I could come up with was the fact that two unusual items had been fished out of this slough in the last week: a naked man and an expensive hairpiece. So I got to fiddling around with that, wondering what to make of it. To demonstrate what I come up with, I'm going to need a couple of volunteers from the peanut gallery."

Junior deputy hands shot up everywhere, but the sheriff only laughed and said, "Sorry, boys. You're not pretty enough. Woods Bjorkland, why don't you come up here and stand right over there. And—" he cast about the crowd again "—Grubworm McGraw, you're looking fetching today, let's have you over there."

Woods limped up front, his mahogany feet creaking all the way, and Grubworm followed him, rubbing his jaw through the kerchief wrapped around it.

"For the purposes of this demonstration," Sheriff Huck said, "these two galoots are just about the prettiest gals you folks can imagine."

Catcalls from the audience. Woods pretended to fluff his hair. Grubworm waved everybody away in disgust.

"And I," the sheriff continued, "am about the handsomest riverboat gambler you can imagine."

More hoots until the sheriff said one thing more: "My name is Fancy Watkins."

Everyone quieted fast.

"And this lady here," the sheriff said, pointing to Woods, "is wearing a hairpiece and a few other things that's got me thinking I'm a stallion."

"Which you are," Miss Daisy Charms called out.

Nobody laughed, though.

"Deputies," Sheriff Huck said, all serious now, the way he sometimes got when events were moving faster than the eye could follow, "hold up what you found next."

The junior deputies held up their second stick. On the end of it was a black book so thick it bent the stick nearly to the breaking point. The book had a leather hide and gold lettering that said BIBLE.

"What we have here," the sheriff said, "belonged to this other pretty gal."

He pointed to Grubworm but every eye in the crowd had swung to Preacher Good, who was standing as still and pale as ice trapped in moonlight. She looked as though a single tap of a hammer could shatter her into a thousand pieces. Looking directly at her, Sheriff Huck went on.

"What happened next wasn't pretty. But the one woman caught Fancy with the other woman, and it was more than she could bear, seeing some wig-wearing hussy naked with the man she loved, a man who'd promised to take her out West, a man who was also naked. A fight broke out. Things were said. Things that could never be taken back. And in the middle of it, the Bible-toting woman picked an axe off a woodpile and swung that axe, and landed that axe square in the middle of Fancy's bare back."

The sheriff picked up a stick and handed it to Grubworm.

"Would you do the honors?" the sheriff said.





Grubworm pretended to try to split the sheriff's back in half. Preacher Good closed her eyes shut for all they was worth.

"Fancy wheeled around," the sheriff said, "trying to see what was happening, and as he turned, he saw the other woman going through the pockets of his clothes. He tried to stop her. I'm sorry to have to say it, Deputy Tom, but Fancy never made any stop at Ernest T. W.'s boat. Close as that grocer watches his stock, he would have known of any visitors and would be a thousand miles from these parts if Fancy had dropped off a pearl. But meanwhile, Fancy had an axe sticking in him and a lady friend digging in his pockets."

The sheriff staggered over toward Woods Bjorkland, ready to pitch himself forward, but before he did, he explained, "And at the last, this woman wearing the wig sees the look in Fancy's eyes and lifts the lady's gun she keeps for company that gets too friendly and fires right between his eyes. The shot throws him backwards toward the first lady, who catches him and tries to hold him but can't quite do it."

The sheriff reeled back toward Grubworm, grabbing him by the shoulders and pulling him toward Woods until they all three collided.

"And so all of us are piled up and headed toward the edge of the boat and river beyond, where we fall in, wig, Bible, and Fancy."

The silence that captured us was finally broken by Miss Daisy Charms. "I've never heard such hopped-up foolishness," she said.

She was blushing as she said it, which was a new thing under the sun.

About then Preacher Good crumpled sideways in a swoon. Everybody gathered around to gaze down at her as if they were peering over the edge of the Grand Canyon at someone far below. A voice in back said in a disappointed voice: "You mean we ain't going to get to string up them pearl buyers?"

"Fraid not," Sheriff Huck said. "It was a love triangle, which is as old as geometry and nearly as fatal."

It sure sounded like Sheriff Huck had said something powerfully wise. Lots of people were nodding their heads as if it must be so. But there was one voice of dissent, and it belonged to Deputy Tom.

"Now hold on, sheriff. That's a fine web you've spun. But it don't do nothing to explain what happened to that pearl."

"Oh, that," Sheriff Huck said. And with a swing of his hand he slapped Grubworm McGraw square on the back. "That's been hiding in Grubworm's cheek ever since he picked Fancy's pocket after the poker game and put a marble or something in its place."

The pearl that Grubworm coughed up landed on the ground, sparkling like a promise for a better tomorrow at our feet. There might have been a few of those present who believed that a better tomorrow was acoming, too. But Sheriff Huck wasn't one of them. Right about then Preacher Isabelle Good came around, and sitting up, she ruined the sheriff's triumph by



saying, "I never loved that river-boat charlatan. Ever. And don't be telling these sinners otherwise. Mr. Fancy Watkins had horns on his head and embers in his heart. I did it all for the Lord and the poor sinners of Tombstone, Arizona. Thaddeus had promised that pearl to me, and when I came to claim it, Fancy and that creature here—" she pointed at Miss Daisy Charms "—did nothing but laugh at me and the Lord's plans for me. That is why the wrath of the Almighty rose up in my arm and took hold of the axe. The rest of it you got pretty close to right, sheriff, but please don't be saying it was my love of Fancy Watkins that triggered everything. It was my love of the Lord and nothing less."

For a second or two Sheriff Huck took this news pretty hard, but he rebounded quick. That was because he had to hustle over to the pearl to keep it in safe company before it took to disappearing again. I knew

that by the time a week had passed, he would be dropping the love triangle part from his retelling and just be saying that Preacher Good did it for the Lord. Elections were coming up, and he always did like to paint himself with glory.

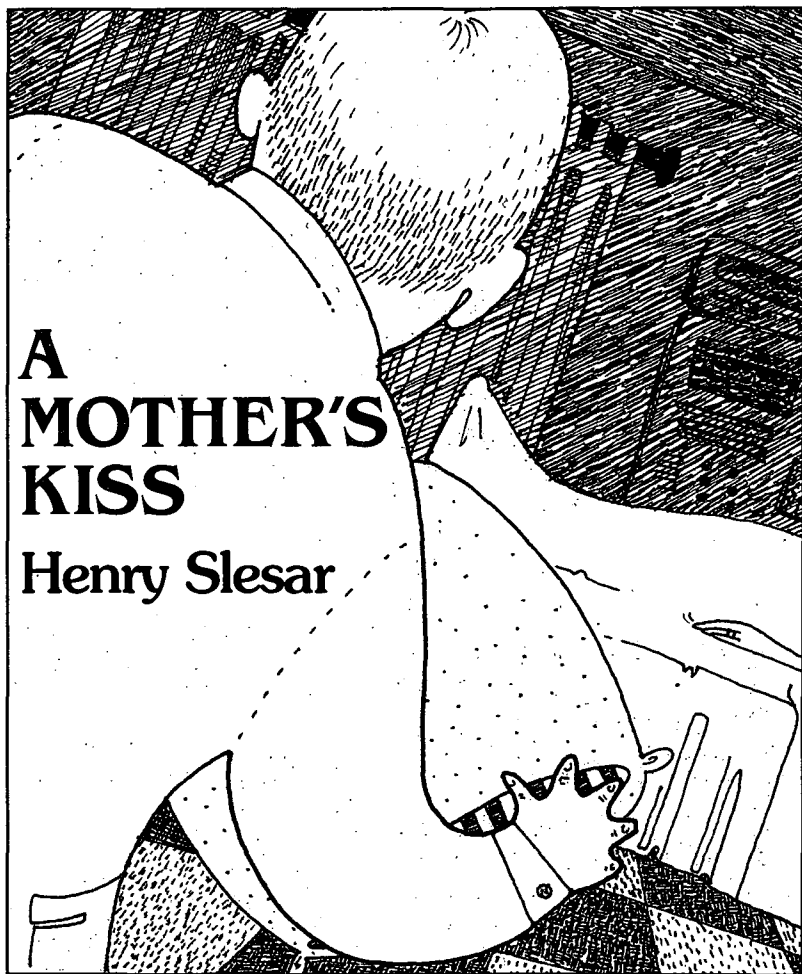
As for Preacher Isabelle Good, she went quietly, claiming there were no doubt souls in the women's penitentiary in need of her ministering.

If you're wondering what became of the pearl, you're in good company. Somebody blasted open the sheriff's safe one night, and that pearl hasn't been seen in these parts since, at least not by anybody who will admit to it. But lately I've heard the sheriff let drop that he might not be running for reelection, that maybe he might be thinking of retiring. I don't believe it myself. Even if he did somehow find himself a windfall, he still needs some kind of excuse for getting out of the house.

**Note to Our Readers:** If you have difficulty finding Alfred Hitchcock's *Mystery Magazine* at your preferred retailer, we want to help. First, let the store manager know that you want the store to carry this magazine. Then send us a letter or postcard mentioning AHMM and giving us the full name and address of the store. Write to us at: Dell Magazines, Dept. NS, 6 Prowitt St., Norwalk, CT 06855-1220.

# A MOTHER'S KISS

Henry Slesar



**N**o thank-God-it's-Friday for Jeff Walton. Friday at five meant St. Luke's Hospital, where his wife Cheryl would be waiting at the bedside of the gray corpse that was her mother. Well, not quite a corpse. Damn it. Not quite.

Jeff was a sales rep at a computer catalogue company. There were four others manning the phones, and each had heard his mother-in-law joke. "I'm lucky—my mother-in-law lives in another state." When they asked what state, he said, "Vegetative."

It was the word the doctors had used following the six-week period in which they used the word "coma." The neurologist, Dr. Braxton, said that comas usually lasted a few weeks after the incident that caused them. (Cheryl's moth-

er had been hanging kitchen curtains when she fell off a chair and struck her head against the kitchen stove.) But when mother didn't wake up, Braxton offered a graver diagnosis: "It's a persistent vegetative state. She's lost all cognitive neurological function, but she can still breathe on her own."

"But—how long will that last?"

"Well, years," the doctor said. "Better think in terms of years."

Jeff had never liked his mother-in-law, but he made sure she didn't know it. Cheryl's widowed mama was rich. Her husband had left her a bundle. Cheryl guessed at a million two. It was a comfort to him, especially now. Working among techies, he had caught their fever, their dot-com disease. Every penny he had went into startup shares. And then came the market slide.

He was skimming the latest depressing numbers from Wall Street on his computer when the telephone rang. Cheryl was still at Tilton Elementary, where she taught third grade. "They called a faculty meeting," she groaned. "I'll be at least an hour late."

"No sweat," Jeff said. "I'll meet you at the hospital around seven."

"No," his wife said, "I saw Mama at lunchtime; I promised we'd be there at six. Go on ahead, Jeff, please."

"Mama doesn't 'expect' us at all," he said. "She never even knows we're there."

She made Jeff promise; it was easier than enduring a crying jag. He hung up, put on his frayed sports jacket, and left. Maybe it was a good thing. Maybe he could pay a visit to St. Luke's business office and get more solid information about costs.

It wasn't the first time he had tried. He was sure Cheryl knew how much it took to keep her mother on that feeding tube, to maintain that private room, to pay nurses to attend to her bodily functions. Cheryl wouldn't tell him. "It's her money," she said. "It's her life and her money."

"But what about *our* life?" Jeff wanted to say, but Cheryl had no sympathy. He'd never talked to her about dot-coms, about vanished dreams; he had always been comfortably certain of the future, thanks to Mama's million two.

At St. Luke's he went to Room 510 first in case some snitch of a candy stripper told Cheryl she hadn't seen him.

It was no different from fifty other Fridays.

He didn't bother to enter. He knew exactly what to expect. The room would be dark. The white walls would look gray, and so would the bed-sheets. But the most colorless object in the room would be Cheryl's mother. A gray cadaver, an unburied body.

"In a way," Cheryl once said tearfully, "I'm glad she doesn't know how she looks. Mama was always so careful about her appearance. She never came downstairs without her makeup on. She wore peach lipstick. She would kiss me goodbye when I left for school, and my cheek would smell like peaches for the rest of the day."

At St. Luke's business office he flirted with a lady named Mrs. Bechman. After some cajoling she agreed to find the folder he needed for his "accountant."

She clucked sympathetically when she opened it and read the contents to herself. Jeff seized it. All expenses were itemized, and the bottom line was in boldface. In the eleven months since her hospitalization, Mrs. Eleanor Wisham's total expenses had amounted to three hundred ninety-four thousand, one hundred twenty-five dollars. There was also an addendum sheet, with a brief notice of a price increase of some fifteen percent in the following annual period.

Jeff felt sick. Now he knew his mother-in-law's worst symptom. She was hemorrhaging money.

Waiting for the elevator, he did some quick calculations in his head. The conclusion was easy to reach. In another fourteen, fifteen months, the Wisham Fund would be gone.

Cheryl hadn't arrived yet. This time Jeff walked into the gray darkness and closed the door behind him.

He wasn't thinking. The word mercy occurred to him, but he didn't dwell on it. He found himself wishing that his mother-in-law's coma had required a breathing tube, a respirator, something with a device that could be unplugged. There was only one method left to him. He slipped the pillow out from under her head and placed it over her open mouth. He pressed down hard. He counted to sixty. Then he quickly replaced the pillow under her head.

He opened the door and went outside, looking for a white coat. He found the floor nurse, and said: "I think something is wrong with my mother-in-law. She's making funny sounds."

By the time Cheryl arrived, her mother's room was crowded with white coats. They made only one attempt at resuscitation before conceding that it was hopeless. They answered Cheryl's hysterical questions by admitting that breathing problems were not uncommon in her mother's case. Jeff even thought that someone used the word mercy, but perhaps that was only in his head.

Cheryl broke away from his comforting arms and went to the bedside. "I don't understand it," she sobbed to Dr. Braxton. "I saw her at noontime. I decided to do something I've wanted to do for a long time. I brought some makeup—some peach lipstick—"

They looked again at the dead woman's face, at the pink smudge on her lips, the smear across one cheek. Jeff didn't know who had the idea of removing the pillow behind her bed. They all stared at the pink, peachy impression on the pillowslip, the outline of a perfect mother's kiss. Then they were staring at him.

# THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



*Hulton Archives*

**Pole Position.** We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to AHMM, Dell Magazines, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10016. Please label your entry "June Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

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The winning entry for the January Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 141.



FICTION



# THE HORSE PRINCIPLE

Tom Berdine

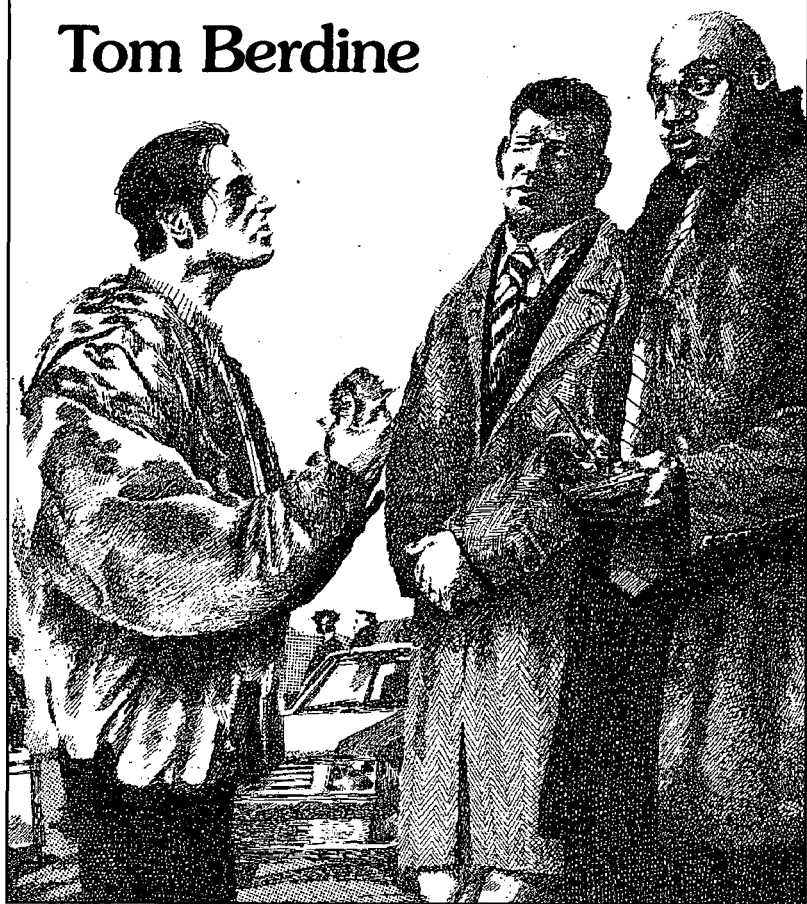


Illustration by M. K. Perker

Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 6/02

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**I**t was not as unusual as one would think, Bill finding a body. Bill was always finding things. It wasn't even his first body. When he was a kid, his sister Gwyn used to call him Finder Man. Now that he worked for the state highway department, plowing and sanding the interstate in winter and mowing its berms and medians in summer, Bill was in Finder Man Heaven. High up in the cosy cab of the big yellow highway department dump truck, rushing through all of those crystalline Great Lakes winter dawns, lost objects displaying themselves on fresh, blue-white powder snow like jewelry on black velvet in a shop window, headlights boring through the blackness of night, lost objects blinking like kit-tycats jumping suicidally into his headlights, astride his yellow highway department tractor under all those incandescent summer skies, all the vegetation stiff with sun like the teeth of a giant green curry comb, all the stuff caught there, waving to him, calling out to him like he was on a float in a parade, he could have been a one-man lost-and-found department.

Except that nobody ever asked, hey, did you find my cashmere sweater lying along the interstate? Did you happen to run across my diamond bracelet in the drainage ditch, my four hundred dollar sunglasses, my three-beaver Stetson hat, my child's favorite teddy bear, my left custom-made trilaminate downhill racing ski, my brand-new, never-been-driven electric golf cart? Once something goes out of a car window or off the bed of a truck at

sixty, seventy, eighty miles an hour, it's gone. If one drives from point A to point Z on the interstate and comes up missing something, one does not say to oneself, I'll drive back along the way I've come and look for it. No: it's gone. So actually Bill was more like a one-man department store, always with stuff he was giving away.

Plus, people were always scamming him. Like: hey, Bill, can I *have* that, man, I mean, it didn't cost you anything, right? Bill let people give him the short end of the stick all the time according to Gwyn, the sister, who, according to herself, always called it like she saw it. One time Bill found forty-seven thousand dollars in an aluminum briefcase. He heard it plink off the blade of his plow at twenty miles an hour in a blizzard about three o'clock one February morning. He turned it in to his supervisor. Maybe this was drug money, or counterfeit money, bank robbery loot, kidnap ransom. The way it's supposed to work is that the finder of something like that gets to keep it if no one claims it within a certain length of time. Nobody did claim the forty-seven thousand, and it never did become ammunition in the war on crime, but that didn't mean Bill ever saw any of it. A man came all the way up from the Department of Transportation to tell him that the attorney general had issued an Opinion, which, unless successfully challenged in court, had the force of Law, that since Bill had found the money On The Job and had signed some kind of Waiver at the time of his hiring, the money belonged to

the state. Bill didn't remember any waiver.

"You shouldn't drink, Billy. Enough that you're a little . . . you know."

Gwyn didn't mean this like it sounded. She was always saying things like this to Bill.

"You forget, see?" she said.

Since their parents had died, Gwyn and her gang were all of Bill's family. There was Gwyn, her husband Kyle, working at the Ford Stamping Plant, the three boys, and the baby, a girl, thank God. Just the Sunday previous to finding the body Bill had given Bobby, Gwyn's middle boy, an almost-new, Official NBA leather basketball.

"Who's L.F.H.?" Bobby wanted to know, referring to the initials magic-marked onto the ball.

"Looking For His."

"What?"

"Looking . . . For . . . His . . . Basketball!"

"You're weird, Uncle Bill."

Although "weird" was one of their "fave" words, it was unlikely Bobby or his brothers really knew from "weird" when mostly they just stayed in the house after school and watched TV or played video games. "Get a life," Bill was always telling them. Bill himself, on the other hand, encountered real weirdness all the time just with the stuff he found along the highway. When he called the body in on the five-watt, extended-range radio-phone the interstate crews carry for just such business as summoning police or emergency personnel or a crew to dispose of a hazardous object, like, for example, a carcass, the highway

department dispatcher, whose name was Frona, wasn't even that surprised. "Jeez, Bill, another feather in your cap," she said sarcastically.

He had been mowing the banks of the drainage ditches between mileposts four-five-three and four-five-five on the westbound side of the interstate when a solo black and white sneaker popped into his vision beyond the nose of his tractor. It was a "tennie" of that very simple, old fashioned style that used to be referred to as a "tennis shoe" before modern sports shoes were invented and which had lately become popular again as "retro." Bill was pretty up on style, from watching TV and also just from paying attention to the stuff he found out along the highway. Something like a shoe ordinarily he would have just mowed over, but then there was that palé but not quite white flash, bare flesh, the ankle articulating the shoe, and then the other foot, bare, and as he brought his machine to a halt and arched himself out the door of the Plexiglass cab, the two bare, skinny legs, black fake-leather miniskirt, pink-bloused outstretched arms and the two open, slightly cupped and upturned hands nestled in fluffy pompoms of overgrown clump grass as if they were delicate, expensive art objects. She looked like an angel.

Bill turned off the tractor, called Frona on the radio-phone, and climbed down. He watched where he was stepping. The cops would hate this, his walking through a crime scene, but he was a trained

EMT-1, after all. You had to see if someone was still alive or not. No doubt here: the girl's eyes were wide open, the pupils cast upward. Her complexion had a faintly bluish translucence to it, like the flesh of a mushroom touched by frost. Well cared-for teeth like daisy petals formed a smile behind half-open lips, or alternately a grimace—terror: what else? Although a look of sheer exhilaration, of pure joy, would not have been that much different. Some people smile when they are scared. The wild dogs of Africa smile as a sign of submission. This had just been on the Nature channel. A thin, purplish line circumnavigated the young throat. Her hair was spread outward around her head like a halo, its inky black mixing with the deep green of the clump grass and contrasting with the colorlessness of her skin. The hair had been recently and crudely cropped and dyed.

He squatted down and touched two fingers to her neck, actually touching the soft, cold flesh. On her right wrist there were a total of thirteen bracelets. He touched these lightly also, counting. He tried to lift the slim arm, but it was stiff. Again, he was actually touching her. She didn't smell bad. There was no blood or anything like that. On the left arm and hand there was nothing at all save a small tattoo on the mounded apex of thumb and forefinger: a clumsily executed Christian cross with two rays emanating from its lower quadrants, the kind of thing a kid did to himself in lockup, although today's kids

"pin-and-inked" themselves without going to lockup. Bill had almost the same tattoo himself. Each ray was supposed to stand for a major category of criminal activity. Bill had been about five foot three, eighty pounds at the time he had permanently inscribed himself with the big-house argot for murder and robbery, two rays emanating from the cross's top quadrants. Everybody at Father Baker's Boys Home did it. The rays of the dead girl's tattoo signified drug dealing and prostitution. She was pretty young to be a whore. But there were very young girls working as prostitutes at the big truck stops. One time Bill had seen a couple of them working the Angola Rest Stop, hanging around drinking coffee in the restaurant. By the time they're eighteen they're old in the trade: somebody back at the maintenance shop had said that. A couple of months ago a magazine article about serial killers had caught Bill's attention. "Road Killers," something like that, the name of the article. They Roam, And Kill, At Will, dot dot dot. A lot of serial killers were long-haul truck drivers is what the article was basically about. They picked up prostitutes and runaways, perfect victims because they weren't missed right away, or had already been missing for a while. A serial killer could go cruising right past Bill any time day or night while he was working out there and he would never know. Maybe one already had—looked over, right at Bill: look at that bozo on the yellow tractor. Bill's forefinger was extended, about to raise

the lid of the miniskirt—the area of concern just there, an inch or so beyond the crackled, stitched margin of fake black leather—when the faint note of a siren separated itself from the din of cars and trucks rushing past overhead, from beyond the lip of the grassy bower in which he and the dead girl were situated. He cocked his head. The siren approached perceptibly but from at least a mile away. This was an easy calculation for Bill, familiar as he was with all the various sounds of traffic. The objects in the small pockets in the front of the dead girl's miniskirt expressed rectangularity through the tight surface of the fake leather. He lifted the hem of the miniskirt briefly and looked away. The largest of the several objects in the pockets in the front of the miniskirt was a hypodermic syringe encased in a plastic ziplock bag that was in turn enclosed by a small, clear, plastic box with a snap lid. There was also a marijuana stash box made out of black walnut, about three inches by one inch by a half inch, around which were rubber-banded identification cards and a few folds of paper. The lid of the box slid back, and a spring-loaded pipette popped out of a hollow in the box. It was for smoking dope in small amounts. Bill had one exactly like it. The dead girl's stash was empty. Bill's own favorite high was to smoke a little dope, then smoke cigarettes and drink martinis or good whisky. The reason why he couldn't live with Gwyn and her family any more. Gwyn had kicked him out about four months ago. So he was

in his own place again. There was also a small brass dope pipe in the same pocket as the stash. Actually, Bill had one of these, too. A plastic cigarette lighter was in the other pocket along with a tiny jackknife. Useless for self-defense. You'd have to stick someone in the eyeball to make any impression at all.

Under the rubber band, three different I.D.'s. Tiffany Kandinsky, Cheektowaga, driver's license photo nothing like the dead girl. Erie County sheriff's photo identity card: Debra Lynn McKey, Hamburg, a little more like the dead girl but still not her. Donella Rashad-Amin's library card, the signature of an eight- or ten-year-old. Newspaper clipping, coming apart at the folds: NIGHT THREE OF GANG VIOLENCE. Queen City UPI. Edward Weldon York, 17, blah blah Plum Street, remains in critical shot in head drive-by police spokesman retaliation gang: the approaching siren was suddenly loud. He refolded the clipping and reconstituted the wad of the dead girl's personal stuff around the walnut stash box, repositioning the rubber band so it looked just like it did before, and put the objects back into the same pockets from which he had removed them. He accidentally kicked the girl's right bare foot as he rose to move off. The lace of the sneaker on the other foot was tied in a double knot. It was tied so tight it was pinching her. Bill was in the process of squatting back down when the state police arrived above him and, as was to be expected, yelled at him for being where he was.

"Now come back out exactly the way you went in!"

Bill wasn't giving anybody a hard time. SHERWOOD, the trooper's name tag said. All state troopers had names like Sherwood.

"Wow," Bill said by way of greeting.

Sherwood just looked at him. Bill turned and looked back down the slope of the ditch at the girl.

"A shame," Bill said, "so pretty. You think she bounced? I don't think she bounced. I think she was laid there. Carefully. Like on display almost."

"Just get back in your vehicle and stay there till I tell you you can leave."

"Is that your real name?"

"What?"

"Do you guys use fake names so people can't bug you when they get mad at you?"

"No."

"Do you have some identification I could look at?"

The trooper went squinty.

"Just curious," Bill added. "No offense."

The trooper clicked into police process, displayed his plasticized picture I.D. in its leather folder, meanwhile looking directly into Bill's face with the steady, academy-trained gaze. Sherwood took out his little notebook, also leather, and a ballpoint pen. Full Name? Identification. "Out of the wallet, please!" Statement on exactly how Bill had found her. Recap of above; got it; thank you. Rather efficient, and courteous even.

"I wonder," Bill said as Sherwood was putting his notepad back in

his pocket, "how many dead girls there are on all the superhighways in the country. Or the world. Or is this the only one at this particular moment."

Sherwood kept looking at him.

"Want me to look for the other shoe?"

Sherwood looked behind him down into the ditch.

"First thing you notice, right? Only one shoe. That, and she looks like an angel."

Sherwood turned back, looking at Bill some more.

"How long have you been here, Mr.—Buonaconti?"

"Hey, I'm an EMT, okay?"

"How long before you called this in to your dispatcher, Mr. Buonaconti?"

"Immediately."

"Immediately—is that one second or five seconds? A minute? Two minutes? A half hour? How long were you down in the ditch, Mr. Buonaconti?"

"I don't know. Frana has it written down. That's the D.O.T. dispatcher. Call. Ask Frana. However long it took her to call you and for you to get here from wherever you were. Ten minutes? Fifteen? Twenty? Hey, the passage of time is very deceptive out here on the interstate as you yourself may have noticed. No? Mileposts, yeah—but seconds, minutes, hours? Thousands, thousands and thousands of people going by, their tires hammering away, blasting molecules of concrete into the atmosphere, sacrificing a molecule of rubber here, a molecule of rubber there, but nothing really going on, right? Middle of nowhere.



Literally. If you lived here you wouldn't have an address, right? You couldn't get mail here. You never thought about this? Come on. You can't get much closer to not existing at all. So time . . . hell . . ."

"You don't carry a watch?"

"Yeah, but I don't look at it except near quitting time. Make you nuts, looking at your watch all the time out here."

"Wait in your vehicle, Mr. Buonaconti, till I tell you you can leave."

A couple of state police backup units arrived, then after about an hour an unmarked vehicle with two state police investigators, Captain Creswell and Lieutenant Gleason. Names similar to Sherwood. Creswell was of average cop build, had red hair and a nubbly, square-shaped face like the end of a piece of lumber. Gleason was a big black guy with no hair. He took Bill's name, address, et cetera, the same information Sherwood had taken. The troopers from the backup units formed up a squad to systematically search the immediate vicinity for physical clues. An ambulance—"meat wagon" is how Gleason referred to it; Bill made a face when he said it—and another state car arrived. Creswell and Gleason went down into the ditch with the guys from the meat wagon. Everyone was busy except for Sherwood, who obviously had been given the chore of keeping an eye on Bill. After a while Creswell and Gleason came back up. Sherwood kept hanging around until Creswell shoed him away. It was comical: after all, Bill was originally Sherwood's fish. Bill said, "I think I'm

traumatically bonded to Sherwood," but nobody laughed. Then he said, "I think she's an Italian girl. I'm Italian."

There was a beat of silence, and then Gleason said, "That's very good, Bill," and Creswell said, "Her name is Angel Sarvino, Mr. Buonaconti."

"Wow. You guys are fast."

"No," Gleason said, "we've been looking for her," and Creswell asked, "Did you know her from before, Bill?"

"What? Know her from before?"

"Bill, how did you know her name was Angel?" Gleason asked, almost cheerfully.

"I didn't. I said she looked like an angel. Still, hell of a coincidence. Angel: where did I get that? Must be psychic."

"Are you?" Creswell asked flatly. "Psychic?"

After a pause, the investigators shrugged in unison, Creswell's a small tic of shoulders and Gleason's all eyebrows and palms up, like two clowns. They continued to look Bill over, clowns in charge.

"Do you want me to take a polygraph?"

This surprised and pleased Gleason. Creswell was not in the business of being surprised or pleased and continued to stare at Bill while Gleason went on for a bit.

"... How about . . . this is Tuesday, how about Wednesday, tomorrow morning, I'll set it up and confirm on the phone with you if you'll be home."

"Sure."

While Creswell went back down into the ditch, Gleason hung

around and watched Bill eat his sack lunch, a cold Big Mac. Gleason had told him go ahead and take his break and then they would control traffic for him while he got his machine turned around. They didn't want him to mow anything in the immediate vicinity of the crime scene until further notice, so Bill would have to work somewhere else. Bill was watching the forensic activity in the ditch and was chewing the last of the Big Mac when Creswell came back up, squinting just like Sherwood had.

"Mr. Buonaconti, how did you know Angel was placed down there rather than thrown down?"

"Oh," Bill said, poking around in the McDonald's takeout bag, "just the way she looked." He came up with the sales receipt from the bottom of the bag and looked at it closely. Gleason was making a comical face, and Creswell was still doing Clint Eastwood. Bill's fingers crumpled, palpated, and pinched the receipt slip into the very smallest ball it would make and then flicked it onto the ground between the two state policemen. They both looked down. Gleason stooped and picked the white speck out of the gravel and handed it back to Bill with a little smile.

"Oops. Littering," Bill said.

"See you tomorrow A.M. then, right, Bill?" Creswell said.

"You bet."

Two state police cruisers with their flashers going combined to escort Bill and his machine, with its flashers going, to the next service turn-around at milepost one-five-five. They got him safely onto the

eastbound berm, and he started mowing again. One of the state police cruisers remained behind him on the berm, headlights and emergency lights off and just its parking lights on. It was Sherwood. Bill had proceeded about a hundred yards back in the direction from which he had come that morning when a speeding triple-trailer thundered past, its violent wash bouncing through a stand of cattails in a ditch directly ahead of him. There, snagged and held aloft and bobbing up and down, was the peachy-tan sole of another black and white tennis shoe.

Without hesitating, Bill disengaged the cutter deck and throttled up to make the rise of high ground that stood directly above the pocket cattail pond. This place happened to be the upper reach of Three Mile Creek. If Bill had wanted to, or had to, say his rig broke down and his radio stopped working, he could have gotten off his machine and walked from this spot to his old boyhood neighborhood in about a half hour. In this locale, when Bill was a kid, in a time before this section of the interstate was built, Three Mile Creek had tumbled in a grey shale bed through dense woods and lush bank meadows. Now it was buried in a culvert beneath the westbound lane, reduced to the status of a small swamp in the median strip, taken underground again beneath the eastbound lane and finally released to rattle into the bowl of cattails just below Bill where he sat idling his tractor and staring at the second tennis shoe. It was here that

Bill had found the retarded boy-man, Edward Bobik, Eddie Bubbles, who had drunk almost a whole bottle of wintergreen oil and wandered off into the woods to die. Hundreds were searching the countryside for Bubbles, but it had been Bill who had found him. That's my Finder Man, Gwyn had said. That was long ago, back before their parents were killed and reform school and a few other things. He was staring at the black and white tennis shoe as it bobbed among the cattails when Frona squawked at him from the radio-phone.

"Hey, Bill! The state police are looking for you!"

"Yeah, well, I'm looking for them, too! Tell them to come to the Three Mile Creek culvert on the eastbound side, just east from where they left me. I found the other shoe!"

"What other shoe?"

"Never mind. Just tell them."

Waiting for Frona to acknowledge his last transmission and sign off, Bill turned off his machine and stepped down into the deep grass.

"Hey, Bill? I don't see any Three Mile culvert on the map here. You sure you know what you're talking about?"

"Never mind, Frona. I'll just go get them."

"Well, where are *they* located?"

"I don't have time, Frona, to explain everything to a dumb bitch like you."

As he swung back up into the cab and whacked the radio's handset back into its cradle, he was momentarily elevated in space. Immediately he swung himself back

out and gazed intently at the near panorama: below him and to the west a set of vehicle tracks made a ragged, sweeping U-turn from the westbound lane to the eastbound through the thick grass and boggy ground of the median strip.

He plunked into the bucket seat and started the tractor up and piloted it down the ridge of the berm to a wide spot on the right shoulder of the eastbound lane. He took his machine up to the top of its meager range and, contrary to Department of Transportation policy and procedure, seized an opening in the traffic and swooped across the eastbound lanes. He slowed to half speed and looked for a spot to descend into the swale of the median. Away east a single strobe of blue police flasher rode the lens of thickening afternoon air. From the opposite direction Sherwood's amber flashers squatted on the false horizon of the eastbound berm. Bill feathered his brakes as he descended the inner shoulder, then got speed back up and clawed through the deep grass, back in the direction of Sherwood's position, to the sucking margin of the bog. Three Mile Creek had become in its captivity.

Sherwood's flashers were steadily detectable now in the local sky just off to the left. He stopped and climbed down into hip-deep swamp grass. Everything was altered from that time when he was a boy here. Nevertheless, he mushed determinedly to the remnant creek bottom itself and forced his way through, emerging with soaked and muddy trouser legs on the high

ground. The tire tracks followed the trace of the historic wagon lane that had formerly run on the creek's high bank and that now was the only firm ground at hand. Bill went down on his hands and knees and looked closely at the tire imprints, then jumped back to his feet, ejaculating "Wow!" in a loud voice. He backed up a few steps and swung his head from side to side. Walking first, then picking his feet up to run Indian style, he followed the parallel gouges in the turf to their origin on the inner shoulder of the westbound lane. Retracing his path, returning past the mower, he continued on along the track of flattened vegetation and violated turf, all the way to the eastbound lane, twice more throwing himself down and rising, shouting "Wow!" He came back to his mower and again climbed atop the tractor's engine cowl and turned his gaze through the entire one hundred eighty degree arc. "Wow!" Regaining his bucket seat he revved the tractor and executed a cautious three point turn. He made speed again, slogging eastward down the uncut median until he was opposite the place where Angel Sarvino's body and the state troopers were. He went up, frying the clutch a little in low-low as he made the hump, and then crossed the westbound lanes. The meat wagon had left and all but two of the cars. He skidded to a halt almost exactly in the same spot he had left less than an hour before. Sherwood's patrol car nosedived to a stop in the gravel directly behind him.

"Sherwood! We meet again! The

big guys gone? Well, this is your lucky day, buddy. I found the other shoe. And some tire tracks. I can even tell you what kind of tire. Corona Supers. Great in the mud. On sale at The Big Barn. I just put a set of them on my own truck the other day."

By the time Captain Creswell and Lieutenant Gleason got back to the site where the body had been found, took Bill's tour of the area containing the other shoe and the tire tracks, assigned another contingent of troopers to search that area, transported Bill to the state police barracks off Exit 57A, got done with their "further questioning" of him and arranged for a trooper—Sherwood!—to take him home because they had impounded his Toyota four-wheel drive pickup truck ("... standard procedure in situations like this": Creswell) the liquor stores were closed. Might as well drop me at my sister's, he told Sherwood. Gwyn always gave his breath the sniff when he came, didn't want him setting a bad example for the boys.

"Find anything today?" weird little Bobby asked him. He told them the story of the dead girl while he worked on a plate of lukewarm spaghetti. Started to. Then Gwyn, when she realized what he was talking about, sent the boys to bed. They put up a ruckus, and Bobby got his butt whipped with Kyle's belt. "Thanks a lot, jerk," Gwyn said to Bill, although she didn't really mean it as harshly as it sounded. Anyway, she wanted to hear the rest of the story.

"What it was like, it was like this tennis shoe was the only hot dog bun at the wienie roast. All these kids waving their hot dogs around on their sticks, and one kid, only one kid's got a bun, see, and they're all chasing him around, you know, when the wind from the big trucks goes through . . ." He tried to demonstrate "cattails" with his hands. Gwyn's eyes kept twitching over to her husband's eyes and then back to her brother. Kyle said it was first of all anything but standard procedure to get your vehicle impounded.

"Think, Bill: how standard could that be?"

"They read you your rights, Billy?"

"Yeah, of course they did. Hey, Kyle, is there a kid in your brother-in-law's family named Angel?"

"Hah?"

"Billy! You're a suspect in a murder investigation! And you wanna take a lie detector test in the morning? You got rocks in your brain?"

"Angel? Oh, right. John's kid. One of my new brothers-in-law, John Sarvino, the motorcycle cop, from his previous marriage. My sister blames it on me. I marry an Italian, so she's gotta marry one. Remember? Bill, you met them at the wedding, for chrissake. Yeah, little Angel Sarvino. Why do you ask?"

"Wow."

"Billy, time to 'fess up. You been hittin' the sauce again? Or what? Billy? You been smoking pot again, you don't remember anything? I'm calling my attorney. Jesus, you never learn, do you?"

"A little cutie pie that Angel.

Quite the story on her. You hear something about her?"

"Wow."

About then Gwyn became extremely irritable and said some things she really didn't mean, so Bill never did actually get around to telling them about the big coincidence, even though it was kind of a death in the family.

"Don't do anything until I tell you!" Gwyn was still shouting at him from her front porch as he went down the Lexington Avenue sidewalk under the streetlight. "I'll call you in the morning! Don't do anything!"

Kyle would have taken Bill home if Bill had asked, but he didn't. Kyle was not the type to offer. After all the stuff Bill had given him: just lately an almost complete set of Jack Nicklaus golf clubs, with repairable bag. A block away Gwyn's parting shot was still audible. She had been standing on her porch watching him go, and now here was her parting shot: "Don't go drinking, whatever you do!"

Bill hailed a cab on Richmond and told the cabbie to go straight down to Allentown. The cabbie was a guy he sort of knew, the only reason he stopped, the guy said, the way Richmond Avenue was getting. Bill was wearing his lightweight Sabres jacket, so they talked hockey until Bill jumped out on Wadsworth. He gave the guy a nice tip. Wadsworth was a quiet corner from which you could scope out the level of police presence in Allentown before actually going in. There wasn't much happening, just the usual schizophrenic, Piano Man, strolling

on his heels in slow motion from one sidewalk to the other, back and forth across the street. Only the crazy put themselves in the way of the Queen City cops. Bill stayed in the darkness of a large tree in Days Park and watched Piano Man graduate up Allen Street. Bill had started to move out when he picked up the dulcet hammer and pop of a Harley-Davidson, which could only be a cop, all the other biker gangs banned from Allentown for years, since the Riots. Bill hid behind the tree as a pair of motorcycle cops appeared and, abreast in the street, slowly lugged toward him. They turned onto Wadsworth, passing close to Bill's tree, and continued on. He stepped out then, zipping up his Sabres jacket as he waited further on the passage of a loud pickup truck, and strolled with his fists in his jacket pockets past the bright blue and yellow front of the Jupiter Room, where he never went any more, beneath the stuttering neon of Nietzsche's, a totally boring place, on past newly gentrified Mulligan's and finally to the bombed-out-Beirut-looking front porch of The Pink, which he ascended. In The Pink's darkness he moved quickly toward one of the small tables in the back. His foot struck something small and heavy that zinged away into the darkness and rattled metallically between the base of the jukebox and the wall corner. He stooped and captured it: a polished metal ball, a ball bearing, three-eighths or a half inch, the size of the end of his pinky finger. The waitress, who was beautiful, loomed above him as he squatted, examining it between

thumb and forefinger in the pinball machine's illumination, and then the bartender, Doug, came up behind her.

"You know we can't serve you, Bill."

"Fine," he said and stood. All the money he had put across the bar here, now he couldn't get a single drink. He walked out and snagged another cab. "Rendezvous," he told the cabby.

"Soddy?" Some kind of foreigner.

"Johnny's Ron-Day-Voo Room!" he said. "Niagara at Pennsylvania! Don't you know anything? Take a right right here, go one block, then a left! Jesus H. Christ!"

At the Rendezvous he ordered a gin martini. Flacco, from his old neighborhood, was bartending. When Bill paid, he got change for the cigarette machine. He sampled his drink on his way toward a booth in the back. He set it down on a table and tossed his coat onto the booth seat and returned to the front where the cigarette machine was. There was a girl at the bar with her hair bleached totally white. The cigarette machine screwed up. He had to get Flacco to open it up and get him his pack of Camels. He opened the pack and offered one to the girl with the white hair. No thanks, she said. When he got back to the table his drink was gone. Somebody had swiped his drink, come along, grabbed it, slammed it down, and left the glass. He went back to the bar with the empty.

"You see somebody swipe my drink back there?" he asked Flacco. Flacco looked, then looked back at Bill. He didn't say anything when



Bill ordered another martini. Bill was keeping his eye on his table in the back. If they'd steal his drink, they'd steal his coat. He tipped Flacco five dollars. He knocked a Camel out of the pack as he walked back toward his table and put it in his lips. No matches. He went back up to the bar and had to stand around while Flacco waited on other customers, just to get a pack of matches after having already had to wait around to get the cigarettes. He kept looking back at his table where his drink was sitting.

"I'd love to catch him trying it again," he said in the general direction of the whitehaired girl. She didn't respond, even to look up. He asked her if she had a match. She had a lighter in her purse.

"It's the guy back there at the pool table. The big one."

Bill looked, not saying anything.

She lit his cigarette with her lighter. "I wouldn't mess with him. He's a cop. Moonlights here as a bouncer."

Bill was looking. He didn't say a thing.

"Can I get one of those?" she asked.

"Change your mind?"

She made an affirmative noise as she lit up and blew out the first big drag. "You scared me a little before. I don't know you or anything."

"You're right. A girl shouldn't just be taking cigarettes from guys she doesn't know, especially in a place like this."

That got a smile out of her. Bill went back to his table, grabbed his drink and his coat and came back to the bar. She gave him another lit-

tle smile as he settled onto the stool next to her.

"Want to hear what happened to me today?"

"I don't know. Do I?"

"I found a dead girl."

He sipped his martini and took a drag off his cig. She wasn't saying anything. In fact she was looking around.

"I shouldn't have blurted that out," he said. She was willing to look at him again, but she still wasn't saying anything. She had brown eyes.

"It's so weird. I guess I needed someone to talk to and I picked on you. I'm sorry. I'll shut up and go away."

"It's okay," she said. She was looking at him steadily now. He told her about it. Her eyes overflowed, eyeliner running down.

"It's so scary!" she said, leaning toward him, keeping her tears from descending onto her tight white pants.

"Scary? You want to hear 'scary'? The cops think I did it."

Her eyes got round. Bill signaled Flacco for another round.

"By the way, my name is Bill," he said, offering the girl his hand. In the palm of his hand was the thing he had made with his fingers while he was telling her about Angel Sarvino. He had picked up a beer bottle cap off the bar and molded it around the ball bearing he had found on the floor of The Pink. It looked just like an eye, surprisingly realistic in the dimness, the ball bearing slick with points of colored light from the beer sign behind the bar. Bill was smiling. Grinning ac-

tually: practical joke. The other bartender was standing there now, bigger guy than Flacco, waiting for Bill to look at him. Bill was looking at the girl with white hair, who was still not saying anything. No, it wasn't the other bartender, it was the cook. Blood and food all over his apron. Smiley type face but no smile. The cook bobbed his head, once, emphatically, like a very big rooster, like he was about to say something, but then, no, he was just looking at Bill very intently.

Bill said, "How you doing? I forget your name," offering the cook his hand.

"You've had your two drinks, Bill. That's it."

"It? I've only had *one*. My first one was stolen by one of your other customers. The big guy over there by the poker machine. Your cop buddy. Ask her."

"Bill, I stood right there by the stove and watched you drink it."

"I *tasted* it."

"No."

"He's telling the truth!" The whitehaired girl, on Bill's behalf.

"You're shut off, Bill."

Two more guys materialized behind Bill, lining themselves up to take one arm apiece. One of them was the off-duty cop.

"Jeez!" The whitehaired girl.

"You don't want to put your hands on me," Bill, turning off his stool and facing them. First one, then the other moved back a step and set themselves. Behind him the cook said, "That last drink was on the house, Bill. Time to leave now."

Bill gave each of the bouncers a

little stink-eye and walked. At the door he turned and said, "Check out the Eleven O'Clock News! Losers!"

On the sidewalk behind him the whitehaired girl: "I've got a bottle at my place."

Her name was Jen, and she lived deep West Side in a condo in a two story brick building. She had a car. While she was parking, Bill said, "Very institutional-looking," being clever.

"Used to be P.S. 18."

"Wow. I actually went here for a little while once."

"A little while?"

"I moved around a lot from school to school."

"Oh yeah?"

"I was in foster homes and group homes and such."

Jen lived with her friend Carly and Carly's boyfriend Jeff, neither of whom were home. She had some cheap whisky left over from a previous boyfriend.

"These bartenders and bouncers and waitresses all party together after hours," Bill started telling her while she was getting ice cubes from the fridge. "I been in maybe two real bar fights in this town and it's like I'm a piranha."

Jen flexed a plastic ice cube tray over the sink. *Rrrr*, the ice complained. Bill was looking at her back. *Rrrr*, the ice went, and exploded from the tray. Bill's hand found his key chain in his pocket. The fob was a short length of lanyard he had made from a white shoestring, the slip ring for keys on one end and a snap-clip on the other. He had picked up some crafts in

one of the group homes. There were just his house keys on it now. He had unclipped the truck keys at the state police barracks when he had had to give them to Creswell. Now the key chain came out of his pocket and started twirling round and round his index finger. Like gum chewing, the key twirling had a life of its own. Bill kept it up even though it was annoying, twirling and talking. "Okay, so tell me what you think, and if it's too creepy just tell me to shut up. Stick your tongue in my mouth, anything, just shut me up, ha-ha-ha . . . So the doer, okay, the perp . . . he comes along westbound, stops, takes the girl's body down into the ditch, arranges it like I told you before, like it's a store mannequin on display. Like an angel, like I said. It's gotta be the middle of the night, right? When there's hardly any traffic, and no cops. He comes back up out of the ditch, back into his four-wheel pick-up truck or SUV, I'll tell you in a minute how I figure that, and proceeds a mile and a half or so farther west, then turns down into the sunken median strip and at a fairly good clip judging from the appearance of the tracks, a very unsafe thing to do, really, because you can't see what's down there ahead of you at all. And there's a service U-turn, for chrissake, just about another half mile farther. You know, you've seen them: NO U-TURN, the sign says, but there's nothing to stop you really. But he doesn't use the U-turn. Or continue on to the next exit and reverse direction there. No, he takes the dive into the median, which is like a swamp

there." Bill is twirling his keys and talking and walking back and forth in Jen's living room. She is watching him, standing very still with an ice cube held loosely in her hand, listening to his every word.

"A ditch out on the interstate is not a bad choice, really, as a quick and down-and-dirty place to dump a body. Nobody goes there unless they break down and have to pull over, and what are the chances at that particular spot on the shoulder? A million people go past, but nobody goes there. Like the twilight zone. A place you look at but don't really see, okay? A cop sees you parked on the shoulder he might, *might* stop and check out what's happening, if he's got absolutely nothing better to do and you happen to be, like, (a) a nice-looking chick such as yourself or (b) driving like a Caddy or a Mercedes. So the perp is that smart anyway. But then apparently loses it, becomes unsmart, does a U-turn in the worst place you could think of to do a U-turn. Why? Did somebody stop, interrupt him, chase him maybe so that he went down into the median to get away? Not a cop, obviously. So, who? A person who didn't call the police? Unless the killer offered him, too. Another body out there. Wouldn't that be something? Or he and the killer are involved in something together that keeps him silent. Lotta possibilities. But then there's the really strange part. After the perp successfully completes this daredevil stunt in the median, miraculously avoiding getting stuck in the swamp, he gets up on to the eastbound lane and throws

the dead girl's other sneaker over the top of his cab, with his left hand, throws it hard enough that it flies over the top of his vehicle and lands in a roadside ditch, a cattail pond actually, which happens to be the sad remains of Three Mile Creek. Talk about coincidence—"

The velocity of Bill's spinning keys has gradually increased as he has talked and paced. The ice cube in Jen's fingers is melting, growing slippery.

"Why did he do that? What's the story on this second sneaker? Did he only notice he had it after he had driven away from where he left the body? Like, oops, her other tennie, damn, better dump this evidence, too. Why didn't he, then, just give it the toss right away? It's hard to see him discovering the shoe while making the big, sloppy U-turn through the Three Mile swamp; he would have been very busy driving his vehicle on a track he couldn't really see through that thick grass with marshy ground on either side—at *night*, are you kidding?—and if anything had startled him or distracted his attention, bingo, he's up to all four axles in mud. If the killer knew he had the shoe with him while he was placing the body in the ditch, why didn't he leave it there with her? If he realized he had it with him at any point during that mile or so he continued on westward, why didn't he give it the toss then? No, he gives it the toss at the most unlikely and difficult moment. And in the least likely direction. Up and over the roof of his vehicle with his left hand, or crosshand with his right

hand through an open passenger side window, and hard enough to fly over the eastbound lanes and land in a cattail pond in the ditch. Very difficult, either, both, whether he's left-handed or a righty, maybe impossible altogether. The tennis shoe actually snags on a cattail, so it's right up where it can be seen. Can a cattail even sustain the impact of a flying shoe?"

Bill is twirling his keys, twirling and twirling. Jen's hand has slowly assumed a cupped posture to prevent the ice cube's escape.

"There are a few things about this other shoe that are not right. For another thing, it doesn't seem likely that the shoe just fell off her foot, although that possibility can't be eliminated. I sound like Sherlock Holmes now, right? Her other shoe was tied on tightly. In fact too tightly. I mean, you tie your shoes every day, how many times do you tie your own shoes too tightly? So maybe the killer tied the sneaker on. Why didn't he tie both on? That—plus the fact that there is no likely point in time when he discovers he has the other shoe, plus the unlikeliness of the other shoe winding up where it did—all suggests fakery. The whole setup, fake, manufactured. Here's a clue, fellas, I knew you'd come find me. Plus there's something else about that second tennie. I'm sitting in my tractor, I'm looking right at that tennis shoe there in the cattails. I see the sole, light brown, like the light toast color of a white bread wienie bun. In among all those cattails it's like it's the only hot dog bun at the wienie roast. All the kids

are running around with their burnt brown hot dogs on their sticks looking for a bun, and there is just this one bun and they're all chasing it. The wind, you know, through the cattails?"

Bill is twirling, twirling, twirling. Jen's fingers squeeze together, attempting water-tightness.

"So then we're talking about a sexual psychopath. I must find that magazine. These killers take little trophies."

Twirling.

"Like underpants or something?" Jen asks, dripping.

"Right. Exactly. A pimento of the occasion. Brings back that lovely feeling. Or like a little religious medal. I know people who still wear a St. Anthony's medal, even though St. Anthony is out. It still has magic for them. I'm Italian. Are you Italian? You look Italian, except for the white hair."

Jen doesn't say. Her eyes have become caught in the lambent blur of the spinning keys.

"But it can't be the shoe that's the trophy. He leaves the shoe. What is it about the shoe, hanging there in the cattails? It's, like, right under my nose."

Jen's eyes are pinned upon the spinning keys. She dries her wet hand on the front of her white slacks.

"Can I get another drink?" Bill asks.

Jen's face is a mask. She has created an embarrassing wetness on her front.

"Ah!" she cries, discovering.

Her own voice sounds like it comes from the next room.

Bill hooks the neck of the bottle of whisky between his first two fingers and hoists it to his mouth. His other hand is still spinning the keys. Bill swallows and comes away with a chaser swallow ballooning in his cheeks. Spinning and spinning. Trails of whisky, like tears, course from the corners of his mouth.

"Another possibility is this is a separate reality, where dismembered happenings, all that lost fun, hook together."

The roommate and her boyfriend come home. Jeff is tall, wears wire-rim specs. When they shake hands, he tries to squeeze Bill's fingers. Jen has been looking at Bill out of the corner of her eye, and now, when Bill looks back, she looks away. Bill lets go of Jeff's hand, and Jeff turns on his heel and goes to the front door, opens it, and stands there with the knob in his hand.

"Time to leave, Bill."

Jeff has a gun, under his jacket in a clip-on holster. Real tough guy, in his Dingo boots and long curly hair. As Bill is half out the door, Jen rushes forward and kisses the corner of his mouth. "Here—" she says, and pushes the whisky bottle into him. The apartment door closes in Bill's face, old fashioned marbled glass arriving ahead of courtesy. Maybe two shots remain in the bottle. The front door of the building is still equipped with the old crash bar, and Bill throws his weight against it. He flies the length of old P.S. 18's entrance walkway where schoolchildren used to gather before first bell and after last, to Rhode Island, where, breathing, he sags upon a young maple tree and

watches the lights go out in Jen, Jeff, and Carly's condo. There is no problem walking home from there. He knows all the Westside neighborhoods. All the shortcuts and get-aways, cribs and corners. So when the pair of motorcycle cops comes up the street behind him, it is no problem for him to disappear up a driveway and into the pitch dark beneath Tommy Mangiero's grandmother's outside stairs. The cycle cops parade in balance-defying slo-mo, walking on two wheels by dint of separate, basso chugs, looking looking looking. They stop at the corner, clear engine throats, go left, still at bare idle, looking. Bill trots back out onto Rhode Island and lopes up the sidewalk along the tree-bowered aisle of fences and porches and cars parked on the Tuesday-Thursday side of the street. There is another vehicle coming with no lights on. Bill squats behind the DiTullio boxwood hedge. It is the same funky white pickup truck that went past him in Allentown. As it draws close, Bill steps out and delivers a hard kick to the driver-side fender: "Huh!"

The truck chirps to a halt.

"What the hell are you doing, Sherwood?"

Sherwood, big-eyed, makes neither answer nor move to exit his vehicle. Seizing the moment, Bill leans on the truck's windowsill with his elbows intruding and his whisky-cigarette breath at point blank.

"First of all, you're a miserable excuse for a cop. A disaster. The best for you is to go back to selling

insurance or whatever, and secondly and more importantly, I am a citizen of the United States of America, and I have rights that don't depend on what you think or what you want or what mood you are in or that you're a police officer, and if you don't tell me right now why you're following me, I'm going to pull you out of there and kick the living crap out of you!"

Sherwood's lips disappear inward. His words are nearly inaudible.

"Bill—dammit, I'm trying to protect you!"

"From whom?" Bill, relishing serendip of repeated m's.

"The Queen City cops!"

"Queen City cops?"

"Shh."

"Queen City cops. Yikes. Johnny Sarvino the cop's little girl. Right. Right. 'Course."

"Get in. I'll take you home."

"You're protecting me? That's so sweet." Here Bill snatches Sherwood's coat lapel. "But I tell you what, Sherwood, I don't think . . ." and here Bill forcefully plants a wet kiss on Sherwood's smooth, square cheek "... you can take care of yourself . . ."

Bill awoke in the early dawn beneath the lilac tree in the back yard of the house where he rented a flat. He got himself in the back door without any of the neighbors' spotting him. He crept quietly up the back stairs and let himself into his kitchen. He immediately took his clothes off and went into the bathroom to run a tub. In the mirror there was a cut on his cheekbone. It



was pooching up, too. He stared into his own eyes for a while, then got into the hot water. He shampooed, soaped himself vigorously. Drying himself he checked for messages on his answering machine. It didn't work all the time; it was from out on the interstate and had probably bounced hard even though it looked okay. He dialed Frona's number at the office and towed himself as he listened to Frona's extension ringing. She was frosty to him when she picked up. He wouldn't be in that day, he told her. He had to go take a polygraph. There was silence between them over the phone line for a space of five or ten seconds as Bill continued toweling himself. Then there was Gwyn's knock on his door, and he hung up on Frona. Right on time, Gwyn. She had her own key to his apartment, so the knock was like an announcement, not asking permission. Her key made an amplified zipper noise in and out of the new lock on the thin-paneled front door, and there she was, no hello, all business, a small white object, her lawyer's business card, outthrust in her hand, not a moment to lose but not to worry, she had it under control.

"You have an appointment with this guy at—Jesus! Look at you!"

"Don't start."

"Is there something going on, Billy? Something you haven't told me?"

"What time's the appointment? Ten thirty. Wow, fast work, Gwendolyn. You really think I shouldn't take the polygraph?"

Gwyn kept moving around to make Bill look her in the face.

"When you call me Gwendolyn, I know you're up to something. And no, absolutely not, you are not taking a polygraph."

"I just thought it would be an interesting experience."

"Bill-eee! Hell-lo-o! You've taken about five of them! Now you're going to tell me you don't remember. Right? I've about had it with the dummy act, baby bro. Every single time you have taken a polygraph you have come up looking guilty. You do not lie well, little brother. You never did. You get caught at everything you do. And you're so freakin' squirrely you look guilty even when you're not. You don't even do truth well!"

"That's not a very nice thing to say to me."

"Billy! Do not say a word unless the lawyer tells you to. Got it? Do Exactly As He Says. He Is Costing Us A Fortune."

Gwyn's lawyer was not the same Gwyn's lawyer as last time. The new lawyer was also new in town. His previous practice had been in Oregon somewhere. William Triplette IV was not a youngster; there was some hard mileage on just-call-me-Billy.

"Can't do that," Gwyn told him. "My brother goes by Billy, and it will be way too confusing. Billy is confused enough as it is."

Bill put in that Gwyn was the only one who ever called him Billy, but this had no effect on the flow of the conversation. Gwyn was making it clear from the beginning who was signing the checks. Billy Triplette was a goodlooking guy: inter-

esting looking anyway, big, tall, with big shoulders and a slight hunchback, big eyes, strong features.

"Where'd you get that Southern drawl?" Bill asked him.

"My father grew up in Georgia."  
"Uh-huh."

Bill's appointment with Creswell and Gleason at the state police barracks was changed to the afternoon instead of the morning, Triplette playing lawyer, showing off how he wasn't going to get pushed around. On the way over in Gwyn's car they picked up a newspaper and there it was on page one, continued inside: INTERSTATE DITCH YIELDS BODY. POLICEMAN'S DAUGHTER FEARED VICTIM OF GANG VIOLENCE. Angel Sarvino age fifteen blah blah there it was: "... found by Department of Transportation worker William Anthony Buonaconti, 32." Surprising how big the article was—two of them actually, the main one going on about how Angel had run away from her father, city policeman John Sarvino, 44, sixteen-year veteran of, and stepmother Elizabeth, 33, several times past year, last time for, holy smokes, they couldn't find her for five months? A cop's daughter and she was able to stay out on the run for five months? The other article was about the ongoing struggle between the Queen City P.D. and the East Side gangs. An East Side councilman was quoted as saying the cops were a bunch of racists and a gangster from the East Side Nation actually was quoted—gangs talked to the press now, they had press secretaries: Billy Triplette—saying it was the cops themselves who had murdered An-

gel Sarvino because she was making her abusive cop father look bad and, according to Effen A, spokesman for the East Side Nation, was "about to drop a dime on him." As Bill was reading this out loud in the car Gwyn was saying, "Oh my God," over and over with a different inflection each time. "Such an embarrassment for the family," she concluded to Billy Triplette as they pulled into the parking lot.

Creswell and Gleason tried and failed to exclude Gwyn from the interrogation. And there was some confusion because they made Billy prove he was really a lawyer. Plus Creswell and Gleason had switched roles. Creswell was doing some kind of down-home country boy routine as he read Bill his Miranda warning, again, for the record, and Gleason was being hostile and silent and African.

"No polygraph," Triplette told them. "You can interview him in my presence. If I don't want him answering certain questions, I'll tell him. No badgering him. Or threatening."

Bill shrugged his shoulders at Gleason and Creswell, Creswell and Gleason.

"Sorry."

"Sho'." Creswell, getting into his hick routine. Gleason glowered, certain in his utter disdain for criminals like Bill that they secretly craved approval from aloof, powerful beings. Bill's key chain found its way onto his right forefinger. At first he just flipped the keys around in a single revolution and caught them in his palm. Flip catch. Flip catch. Flip catch.

"We'll need to keep your truck for a few mo' days, Bill," Creswell said. "Sorry. Hope it ain't inconveniencin' you too much."

"What is *that*?" Bill demanded. "Payback for not taking the poly-graph?"

Triplette nudged Bill. "Bill's making a little joke," he said.

Flip catch. Flip catch.

"I give, man. You got my wheels. I'll take the lie box."

Bill briefly gave the key chain an extra impetus, bringing it to a super fast twirl, like a baton twirler showing off. Creswell blinked. Gleason smiled.

"I could get my truck back right away, right?" Bill persisted, transitioning smoothly back to flip catch, flip catch.

"Well no, not e'zactly..." Creswell started, but Gleason chose this moment to spring.

"Sure! Right away! You pass the lie box, we'll give you your truck back immediately!" Then he winked at Bill, gleefully, viciously. Billy Triplette was on his feet.

"This is outrageous! Using possession of my client's vehicle as leverage to take away his constitutional right against self-incrimination! What's next? Thumb screws?"

Gleason was nodding repeatedly with a malevolent smile fixed on his face and his gaze directed into Bill's eyes. Creswell's p.w.t. patter remained soft, sympatico.

"It's vera' suspicious, Bill. You can appreciate that fact, cain'tcha?"

Bill was flip catch, flip catch, flip catch with his keys. Momentarily their motion accelerated again, presenting a blurred white disc

high-lighted with metallic ephemera and accompanied by a breathy, oscillating hum.

"Nervous, Bill?" Gleason asked.

"Knock it off with the keys, Billy," Gwyn said and Triplette said, "Nervous tics make cops suspicious, Bill. Put the keys away, will you?"

"Oh, by no means!" Gleason crowed. "Twirl away!"

"What is it you want to ask me?" Bill asked, twirling.

"About your fingerprints on the stuff in Angel Sarvino's pockets."

"Yeah, I looked in her pockets."

Big silence except for the insect noise of Bill's keys. Then Gleason, like a parish priest: "Why did you do that, Bill?"

"Curiosity, I guess."

"Curiosity."

"I didn't do anything to the stuff. Just looked at it. I was careful."

"What else did you do while you were in the ditch, Bill? Did you remove any of her clothing?"

"What? No way."

"Lift up her skirt?"

Here Creswell took over, staging an elaborate mime of the primal scene, Mischievous Boy Lifting Skirt, Peeking. "Didja know, Bill," he said, arriving at the peeking part and empathetically rolling his eyes, "that we kin lift fingerprints from skin? 'Specially the skin of a young person like Angel Sarvino."

"Yeah, all right, I touched her. I think I lifted her arm up to look at her bracelets."

"Now, whah wudja do that, Bill?"

"Whah?"

"Whah."

"Curiosity. I'm the Finder Man, right, Gwyn?"

Gwyn, not giving it up, stared fixedly at a spot on the floor over in the corner.

"How long were ya down in the ditch, Bill?"

"I don't know. Not long."

"Well, how long didja sit in the tractor and look at the body before gettin' out and goin' down and lookin' at her?"

"You know, Sherwood asked me the same thing. The answer is: not long."

Creswell and Gleason exchanged glances. No one said anything for a few seconds, then Creswell said, "The tireprints, Bill, the ones you pointed out to us, they match your vehicle."

"Yes, a coincidence that enabled me to identify what kind of tires they were. I thought I was being helpful."

"Oh yeah, very helpful. So helpful I gotta ask myself: whah?"

"Whah?"

"Whah. Whah are ya so helpful? And allatime in *jest* the right spot to notice all these great—and to give credit where credit is due, Bill, I do mean *great*—clues!"

Triplette: "This has become very bizarre, gentlemen. I told you no bullying."

"Fingerprints. Tire tracks. Bill—you knew the victim an' *pre*-tinded not to. That's three, Bill. Three. You know the Horse Principle, Bill? You never hearda that? I'll tell you: Somebody calls you a horse, forget it. Raght? Another person calls you a horse, a coincidence is all. Okay? A third guy calls you a horse? Now you buy a saddle. You never heard that before? It means, Bill, you get

to have just one big coincidence in your story. Tire tracks, fingerprints, prior acquaintance with the victim—how many coincidences we got here, brother? Time to buy a saddle."

Triplette started to put his coat on, a little theater. "Come on, Bill," he said.

"Stop!" Bill told Billy, and to Gleason he said, "Tell me more."

"No, no, Bill, time for *you* to tell us something."

"Okay. I met Angel Sarvino in passing at a wedding where there were about five hundred Italians, my sister's brother-in-law's wedding. She was one of a gang of kids there, but you know everybody gets introduced to everybody at those things, so, yes, I met her, but that was all. I couldn't even remember her name afterward. But her first name did pop into my head when I first laid eyes on her there in the ditch. Then later, after I hear her name from you guys it starts working in my memory. Memory not being my strong suit as my sister here will tell you. That night I ask my brother-in-law what the kid's last name was and, bingo, it's the same kid. I go Wow!"

"Billy, stop with the keys, okay?"

"Wow!" Creswell echoed, still sympatico, a guy who probably had his own overbearing sister. Bill kept spinning his keys; spinning and spinning. Everyone except Gwyn was purposely ignoring it. It was so obnoxious, you had to ignore it.

"What's the other thing—" Bill lobbed into the gap in the conversation.

"Other thing?"

Gleason's mau-mau smile crept back across his lips.

"—you're holding?" Bill persisted.

"Oh. The next coincidence, you mean?"

"Is that what it is?"

Gleason extracted an eight by ten glossy from a manila envelope and spun it across the table to Bill. Before the photo stopped rotating, Eddie Bubbles' angelic attitude was apparent, sprawled in the grass, eyes open and skyward, arms spread, hands expressively cupped.

"The place where you found Angel Sarviño, that's the same place you found Edward Bobik."

"Eddie Bubbles?"

"Did you think maybe everybody had forgotten about Eddie? And check this out."

This is what they had been saving for last, their cleverest detective work: Angel Sarvino's form neatly cut from a photograph taken the day before and laid precisely atop the old photo of Eddie Bubbles.

"Dressup Dolls, ma' big sister used to call this." Creswell, suddenly in the thrall of the feminine. "She used to let me help with the scissors work. You know, cuttin' out all the different outfits, with the little tabs you fold down to make 'em stay on? I used to be embarrassed about things like that."

"A perfect match," Gleason added musically.

"You guys. It never ends. Who gave Eddie Bubbles the wintergreen oil, right? Nobody too surprised the poor dummy would swig down wintergreen oil because it smelled good to him, like it was a big bottle of candy, but how did he

get his hands on it in the first place? Right? I'll tell you what, I think somebody did give Eddie that wintergreen oil on purpose. Probably told him to drink it, as a practical joke. The kids were always tormenting Eddie, especially the big kids, high school guys, because they were jealous that the playground monitor, this great-looking college girl with big mammaries, used to stick up for Eddie. One time I remember they put Eddie up to whispering the f-word in her ear. They thought that was hilarious. The cops knew all about that stuff. But who did they zero in on? Me. Because I was handiest. Because I found the body when nobody else could. Just like you're trying to frame me now. Hey, will you tell me something?"

Gleason: "Okay, I'll bite: what?"

"Is there something about that second tennis shoe?"

"Such as?"

"Something wrong about it? Something that doesn't make sense? I keep thinking and thinking about that tennis shoe. I can't put my finger on it, but there's something about it..."

"You're a real trip, you know that, Bill?"

"Something you're not telling me. Please—"

"You tell us."

"I wish I could."

"I'll give you a hint," Gleason said, his hand shooting out and snatching Bill's speeding key ring from the air. He held it aloft as its whirligig motion exhausted itself, then jingled the keys just above Bill's head, like he was yanking the

proverbial pull-string of the proverbial light bulb over the head, because indeed at that moment Bill's countenance lit up with a slapstick eureka.

"The shoestring! Of course! There was no shoestring! How obvious! Right in front of my eyes! The shoe on her foot was tied too tight, and the other shoe had no shoestring at all! He took the shoestring away as a trophy!"

"Very good, Bill. That's very good!"

"Wow. Good work yourself."

"You don't mind if we hang onto this, do ya', Bill?"

"Go ahead, but I need my house key."

Simultaneously Gwyn and Billy Triplette vomited up imprecations—"Jesus, Billy!," "Goddamn it, Bill!"—and just as simultaneously fell silent, managing to express everything. The interrogation room became quiet except for the hum of a bad fluorescent unit in the ceiling.

"Bill, you sho' are lookin' like a horse."

Here, where Billy Triplette might have started earning his retainer, it was Gwyn who came to the show.

"That's it! This harassment has got to stop! Either arrest my brother or we're out of here!"

"Shut up," Bill told her.

"Tempa', tempa'," Creswell crooned, rising.

"She does have a point, sort of," Billy Triplette said, trying but lamely to maintain composure in the face of what he saw coming.

As they were putting the cuffs on Bill, Gwyn went close up to his face, her voice level and serious:

"You just can't keep your mouth shut, can you, Billy?"

Bill had been to jail. This was Administrative Segregation. The food was not bad, and he didn't have to shoot the bull with a lot of lame-brain cons. The next morning they didn't come up and get him until just before his case was called. No hanging with the riffraff in the bullpen, who also didn't get the bullet-proof vest. Just them on the elevator, down the corridor they went in a rush, a commotion in their wake among the unalert paparazzi, in through the swinging doors, up the aisle—there were Gwyn and Billy Triplette, a quantity of policemen—boom!, the judge rapped the gavel and they were on. When Billy started to complain about Bill's "night in solitary," Bill hushed him.

"Don't you get it? You gotta keep me out of the jail population. So I don't get shanked. By some unknown assailant. Paying off some favor owed to a Queen City cop. Pay attention."

Bail was set at a million dollars.

"A million dollars?"

The judge instructed Billy to keep Bill quiet.

"I'm amazed is all," Bill explained. He wasn't trying to give the judge a hard time. He had co-operated completely right from the start. They did let him stay in Ad Seg. Under even extra supervision. They were friendly, even.

"You kidding?" Billy told him. "You're a godsend."

Bill read and reread all the newspaper stories about himself and the crime. One of the jailers in Ad Seg



asked if he were looking for something in particular. "No," he said. "I'm amazed is all."

Public furor died down after about three days; then something else terrible happened. State Trooper Sherwood's body was found in the dipsy-dumpster behind The Pink, a popular late-night bar on Allen Street. Creswell and Gleason wanted to talk to Bill again, but Billy Triplette told them to forget it. Three weeks later there was a TV "investigative" documentary on Queen City P.D. versus the East-side gangs. The murder of Angel Sarvino was mentioned at the end, but now it was a footnote, an example of the kind of thing that could spark trouble, even rioting, even though it had nothing to do with the "real sources of tension that haunt Queen City." Nothing now about Trooper Sherwood's following the elaborate funeral, the murder of one of the brotherhood investigated at a level and with an intensity that commandeered media discretion.

"City Hall loves you, Bill," Billy told him, choosing dry, tongue-in-cheek insouciance to convey his complete confidence in himself. "You're such a regular schmo. Not connected to the cops, not a gangster. Just a run-of-the-mill lunatic, and they caught you with all that beautiful detective work. They'd love to pin the Sherwood thing on you, too. But they have zero clues. Probably because you're not there to find them for them."

Just as Bill's trial was about to commence, after the jury had been impaneled, there was another me-

dia hubbub. Not just a local story any more: Gwyn and Kyle, coughing up the details of Bill's troubled childhood on major network TV. Gwyn had already warned Bill not to take anything the wrong way that she and Kyle might say to the media.

"You know how I am, Billy, I call 'em like I see 'em."

"Kyle too, he going to call 'em like he sees 'em?"

"Well, yeah."

The Eddie Bubbles story went nationwide. Of course Gwyn didn't know everything. Think the network called Gwyn up and asked her okay? Or even told her everything that was going to be in the broadcast? Eddie Bubbles faceup in the Three Mile Creek woods, and the special computerized reenactment of Gleason and Creswell's magnum opus that upon Defense Motion had been eliminated as any sort of legitimate trial evidence ("Major victory!": Triplette), Angel Sarvino's cut-out doll body migrating jerkily into place over Eddie Bubbles' sprawling form.

What it all meant was that the jury had to be sequestered.

"Of course they'll wonder what they're missing," Bill mused gloomily.

"It is not as unusual as you would expect," Billy Triplette told him, "the jury starting out hating the accused."

First Deputy District Attorney Gerald Koboliszewski himself, assisted by no fewer than three other deputy D.A.'s, manned the prosecutor's table on the opening day of Bill's trial. Courtroom Four was the

domain of Superior Court Judge Joseph V. Fingers and the only courtroom featuring, albeit solely from the bench itself, a thin wedge of view out over Lake Erie. Months of incarceration had left Bill pale and nonspecifically but definitely pathologic looking. His dark eyes were sunken, his Adam's apple protruded, his good brown suit looked borrowed. William Triplette IV's new, white linen, three-piece suit, while managing to convey something of the Southern plantation look to which he may have been entitled by his father's upbringing in Georgia, did not read especially well in Great Lakes winter light. People shivered just looking at him.

In his opening statement Mr. Koboliszewski laid out the scenario ("dark scenario," as elaborated on the evening news) which they had been able to reconstruct from the physical evidence of the crime scene plus information subsequently gathered about the victim and the accused. The prosecutor spoke for two and a half hours, not counting the bathroom break necessitated by the presence of geriatric bladders in the jury box. It was so complex; there had been so many little things to nail down and figure out, Bill being so clever about it and all, so many things he was not allowed to mention to the jury. No dead State Trooper Sherwood. No Eddie Bubbles. Still Koboliszewski managed a little darkening of his voice every time he said "Three Mile Creek."

For his opening statement, Billy Triplette looked the jury in the eye, told them his name was Billy. Bill,

his client, was innocent and they would see for themselves that this was not a guy who could pull off something as clever and complicated as what the state was talking about. (The press ate this up. "Billy Triplette: Genius or a complete yokel?")

First up for the prosecution was Captain Steve Gleason of the state police. The Koboliszewski/Gleason call-and-response litany of hard physical evidence mounded up, mounded up, this little thing here and that little thing there. Information density was achieved, facthood established, reality first glimpsed, then hard-focused, leading inexorably to truth, even a surprise or two, delight actually, at a few minutes after four o'clock when Creswell absently mimicked Koboliszewski's dungeon articulation of "Three Mile Creek" and a flight of hilarity circled momentarily above Angel Sarvino's pretty young corpse. ("Most observers agreed it was a good day for the prosecution, although actually it has now been a day and half for Jerry Koboliszewski and just a half hour or so for Billy Triplette, whose brevity is making some observers wonder, what is Triplette up to? Does he have some cards up his sleeve or just not much to say? Now you're 'In Step With Grant Novachek,' Channel Six.")

"Captain Gleason," Billy began, big smile, baggy eyes, "isn't this absolutely and by far the most elaborate crime you've ever investigated?"

Gleason's eyes twitched and glittered briefly. "Yes," he said.

"Thanks. That's all."

Next up was Creswell, who expeditiously affirmed he had nothing different or additional. On cross, Billy asked him the identical question he had asked Gleason. Creswell rolled his eyes into the back of his head and said, "Yes."

"Well, captain, if Bill Buonaconti killed this girl in such a crafty manner, why would he leave his fingerprints behind, a thumbprint for crying out loud, on her phony I.D.—"

"Objection."

"—and place himself at even greater jeopardy of police scrutiny by finding the body and then finding her missing shoe? And then, pointing out that he had the same tires on his own vehicle as those that made the tracks along Three Mile Creek?"

"Objection! Argumentative."

"Sustained."

"It's preposterous, Captain Creswell!"

"Objection."

"Sustained."

"He's either crafty or an idiot, you can't have it both ways!"

"Objection!"

"Sustained!"

"Tell us, Captain Creswell, about the Horse Principle?"

"What? Objection! Relevance!"

Bill, who had been slouched in his chair with his chin on his breastbone, raised his eyes.

"Captain Creswell's so-called Horse Principle was explained to my client along with his Miranda rights, judge. Aren't you as curious as I am?"

"Sure. Okay, but this better be good."

"So, captain, the Horse Principle says that you get only one coincidence and then you're guilty, right?"

"No."

"Two coincidences."

"Well—"

"Three?"

"Objection!"

"Mr. Triplette, since we've agreed to let you stroll down this little lane, how about letting the witness answer your questions."

"Sorry, judge. What about it, Captain Creswell? Didn't you tell Bill Buonaconti you knew he was guilty because there were two big coincidences in his story."

"Not exactly."

Here, Judge Finger interrupted. "Captain Creswell, tell us, please, just what is the Horse Principle."

Relieved at being able to control a sequence of his own sentences, Creswell regaled the courtroom, the local media, and ultimately the nation—the curious item picked up by the networks—with the Horse Principle. When Creswell was done, Billy Triplette, big face and big, exclamation-point-shaped body cast ceilingward, waited silently for the arrival unpredictable of the moment certain, of collective regret over collective simplicity of pulchritude, of collective wisdom that was collective nonsense, of the truth of the Horse Principle: Huh?

"Isn't, captain, that just *exactly*—" Triplette notching upward, head bobbing, hair loose and flopping on his forehead, finishing, actually, in a thunder "*—what you've got here, captain? A few coincidences and a warm body? Nothing more than a —*" eyeglasses stabbing space "*—*"

**CON-CA-TE-NATION of COINCIDENCES?"**

"No."

"In this country, captain, your so-called Horse Principle has no place in the law! I have no more questions of this witness, Your Honor."

Bill grabbed Billy by the bicep and whispered ferociously in his ear, "That was great, man!"

"It was crap," Triplette exhaled back.

Witnesses three through seven were top forensic examiners in the specialty areas of pathology and trauma, blood and bodily fluids, fingerprints and DNA, and materials, fiber, dander, chemistry. The state had spared no expense. As forecast by Gleason, Angel's neck was broken and the ligature applied to her throat post mortem, she was not killed in the location where she was found, she wasn't raped and no organic material belonging to Bill was found on her remains, except Bill's thumbprint and partials of others on Angel Sarvino's skin, on the black, fake-leather miniskirt, and on several of the objects that were in her pockets. The tire tracks from the median strip matched in brand and type (All-terrain Corona Supers), size (14sr50) and state of wear (new) the tires on Bill's pickup. The vehicle that made the tracks in the median was with a certainty a four-wheel drive pickup truck of the same general weight and suspension type as Bill's truck. The shoestring taken from Bill at the time of his arrest, in the form of the braided fob of his key chain, was the same type (braided Chinese cotton), size (twenty inches),

color (white), manufacturer (Acme-Taiwan), state of wear (new) as the shoestrings from all other Acme Sport tennis shoes, including the one found snagged on the cattail in the drainage ditch formerly known as Three Mile Creek. (More inappropriate giggles, Koboliszewski countering with a stern look.) Furthermore, Bill's handiwork, once unraveled, bore the still detectable compression of the lace's weave from the metal grommets on the tennis shoe's top panel, which also matched the shoe Bill had "found" in the cattails. The flaunting of the shoestring in the form of a key chain was consistent with the behavior of serial killers. (Objection: Sustained.)

Billy Triplette had declined cross-examination of each of the preceding experts. When the materials, fiber, dander, chemistry guy was turned over to him, the lull at the defense table quickly inflated itself to a courtroom-sized silence. Billy was driving the balls of his thumbs into his eye sockets. The defendant himself continued to stare fixedly and with great intensity at the witness in the box. Finally Billy leaned over close to Bill.

"I'm not going to ask this witness any questions, Bill. It will just make things worse."

"There's something funny about that other shoe!"

"Right. It didn't have a shoelace in it. Look, Bill . . ."

"No! No, it's something else! There's something funny about that shoe!"

Judge Fingers *ahemmed* and, when Billy looked up, cocked an

eyebrow. "If I might have a moment, Your Honor."

"There's something about that other shoe!" Bill repeated, a little too loudly, his voice lacking control from the disuse of incarceration.

"Bill—"

"Hey. Just try, okay? It can't get any worse. You just said so yourself. So try to figure it out, okay? What is it with that other shoe? You got the *expert* right *here*! Just try! Ask him some questions!"

The intensity of Bill's pathos commandeered Billy's attention for prolonged, unpleasant seconds as the packed courtroom looked on. An alternate, morally null but respectably lawyerly strategy coiled about itself within Billy, staved off incipient vertigo, and thereby recommended itself: obfuscate and delay. Billy rose.

"Mr. Westmoreland, or, excuse me, Dr. Westmoreland—you are a doctor, aren't you? But not an M.D., right? Oh, you are? Just don't have patients, right? Except people who are already dead. I see. Well. Now. Tell us, doctor. If you would. How do you tell the difference between one shoelace and another?"

"Microscopic and chemical analysis."

"Ah. Really. Someone, an actual human being, looking through a microscope?"

"Yes. This human being."

Laughter all round. Billy spontaneously joined. A little moment of fun. Except for Bill, whose scowl continued to home in on the witness box. Billy tried to catch Bill's eye to signal him to cool it. Next Billy picked up Angel Sarvino's black

and white tennies and with a little flair set them before Dr. Westmoreland on the sill of the witness box: We Are Not Afraid Of This Evidence.

"Tell me, doctor, how many shoelace manufacturers are there?" Billy said.

"Well, worldwide there are several hundred."

"Really? Hundreds and hundreds."

"Yeah."

"Fascinating. And you can tell the difference between them all?"

"Well, sure, the difference between types, manufacturers, and batches."

"Ah. Types. Batches. Absolutely. No margin of error?"

"There are small margins of error. Absolute statistical certainty is rare in physical science."

"I see. Margins of error. How many steps in the process?"

"Oh, three, four steps, I suppose you would call them."

"And there's a margin of error in each step?"

"Well, yes."

"And these margins of error, do they add together as you go along?"

"That would be true."

"You said statistical likelihood, didn't you, doctor?"

"Ah. Yeah."

"Like how you figure the odds when you roll dice in Las Vegas?"

"Well, yeah, I suppose you could say that."

"So one shoelace within a batch of shoelaces, they're all the same, within certain odds."

"You could put it that way."

"So, the odds are that Bill's key

chain was made from a shoelace from the same general batch?"

"The shoelace from the key chain bore traces of indentations to the weave from being in the lacetop of the shoe and being in storage for a period of time. The indentations matched the shoe found in the cat-tails."

"Weren't there indentations from its being braided into a key chain?"

"Yes."

"So you have indentations on indentations."

"More like indentations *in* indentations."

"Ah. Bet you can't say that three times real fast."

"Your Honor—"

"Mr. Triplette—"

"But with all the shoes of a given type's being identical, within the odds, wouldn't the indentations on all the shoes' laces be the same, too, within the odds? A very, very large number of almost identical shoelaces in a very, very large number of almost identical shoes, the tiniest range of variation in millions of laces in millions of shoes."

"Well, yeah. After they're worn, there are small differences."

"Really? And how worn were these?"

"Well, brand-new, actually."

"Aha."

There was an audible yawn from the gallery.

"Brand-new," Billy repeated softly.

Several of the jury were already getting heavy-lidded.

"How many sneaker manufacturers are there, Dr. Westmoreland?"

"You mean, altogether, or how many make this exact sneaker?"

Billy glanced benchward to assay how much more of this he was going to get away with and was greeted by an annoyed but indeed solitary and moist orb, Judge Fingers' other eye having gone beddy-bye in the palm of the hand propping the head. The four monkey faces hovering above the prosecution table had substituted flared nostrils for wide open eyes as they monitored Billy Triplette's funky but weak issue. If only Bill, who continued to cathect a fierce death-ray upon Dr. Westmoreland's every syllable, would knock it off.

"More than one manufacturer makes this exact design?"

"Sure."

A juror completed maximum head droop and startled himself awake.

"Really?"

Here and there eyelids twitched, yearning for REM.

"Yeah."

"Fascinating."

"Your Honor—"

"Yes. Mr. Triplette, this is distinctly not fascinating. Move it along."

"How many shoe manufacturers?"

"I don't know. Two, three, five, a dozen, a hundred, I don't know, it's such a common design."

"They use child labor in some of these factories, don't they?"

"Your Honor—"

"Come on, Mr. Triplette."

"Well where did this pair of sneakers come from?"

"Your Honor—"



"Relevance, Mr. Triplette."

"A moment's indulgence, Your Honor. A man's life is at stake here. This pair of shoes came from where, Dr. Westmoreland?"

"You mean, where were they made, or where were they purchased?"

"That, too."

"We don't know exactly where they were purchased, but—"

"Aha."

"—this kind of shoe is available everywhere."

"Locally?"

"Sure."

"Ah. Which stores would that be?"

"Oh, let's see. The Big Barn has them. BiMark. Sale City. On sale that week of the murder, in fact, at the Big Barn. One of my associates happens to have collected the ad, the shoes are listed at—"

"Your Honor!"

"—six dollars sixty-six cents."

"Mr. Triplette, is this going anywhere? Remotely?"

"Patience, Your Honor, please. Physical evidence is all there is, and we must make the most—"

"Move it, Mr. Triplette, move it."

"Yes, the second part of the question, Dr. Westmoreland, you were about to tell us the point of manufacture of this evidence."

"Your Honor!"

"Mr. Triplette—"

"—manufacture of these shoes."

"Azawa, of Hong Kong, whose product is in turn marketed by many brands worldwide, two big ones in the United States, Red Ball and Acme Sport."

"Ah. Really? How can you tell?"

"Manufacturer's code stamped on the inside of the shoe."

"Shoe. As in one shoe?"

"Shoes."

"You said shoe."

"Your Honor?"

"Ah . . . right, see, I did the fiber analysis and microscopic matching on the right shoe, other people did . . . hello?"

The illumination in the high-ceilinged courtroom suddenly increased as a ragged hole in the cloud cover over Lake Erie passed before the winter sun. Nappers in the gallery roused themselves. Alarm registered one two three four along the chimp line at the prosecution table. A sweet, light gas began to rise in Billy Triplette's great bosom. Rigidly staring, Bill achieved, in perched, buttocks-clenched position within the arms of his oak chair at the defense table, two inches of actual, physical levitation. Judge Fingers degaraged his spare eye. A rapt hush attended Dr. Bob Westmoreland, scientist, alone unperturbed by the sea change around him.

"This one here is a Red Ball Flyer and this one is an Acme Ace. These shoes aren't a pair."

The Horse Principle in reverse is how Billy put it to them in judge's chambers during the immediately ensuing en camera.

"If the second shoe is not connected to Angel Sarvino, and the physical evidence is that it is distinctly from a different pair of shoes and has never, so far as we know, been on her foot, then what is the connection with the shoelace on Bill

Buonaconti's key ring? Also none. And the tire tracks, which are adjacent the second shoe but two miles from where the body was found? They're like Bill Buonaconti's tires, but are they his? Even if they were—and we distinctly don't know that—two miles from the body? What's that count for, judge? They only looked at them because they were adjacent to the so-called second shoe, which now should be called the coincidental shoe, and then only because the defendant, an innocent man, pointed it out to them. The fingerprints on the body and the stuff in her pockets Bill put there being a dummy, like he is, because, judge, you can kind of see the guy is a little different. I'm moving that all the physical evidence about the other shoe and the shoestring and the tire tracks be thrown out. What's left? A jerk who made use of his EMT training at the wrong time, who happened to have met the deceased briefly at a big Italian wedding five months before. They're a coincidence short of a saddle, judge."

The prosecution team, dully one to another, managed a weak, "We still think he's guilty."

"Why?": Judge Finger.

"Well, judge, there's the coincidence of Eddie—"

"Don't you dare!" Billy, leaping, a huge Southern bullfrog.

"Your Honor, we've got a dead sta—"

"Don't you dare!"

"And there's still something suspicious about that other shoe."

"Sit down, Mr. Triplette. Yeah, I agree. There is something about

that other shoe. But I don't know if I quite get it. Do you get it? And even if you do, are you entitled to get it? Do you get to get it? If you get me. And you're right, too, counselor, your client is spooky. But that's not enough, is it? The district attorney got anything else up its sleeve? No? Then that's it. Mr. Buonaconti's weird little self is out of here on prima facie. Live by the Horse Principle, die by the Horse Principle, I guess, gentlemen."

At the party for Bill that evening at The Rendezvous—the Channel 6 Evening News guy fronting the whole spread in exchange for an exclusive interview with Bill—Billy Triplette described the scene in the judge's chambers in loving detail: what he had said, what the judge had said, the looks on the other guys' faces. And then they all, Bill, Gwyn, Kyle, Channel 6 Evening News, Billy Triplette, and Jen with the white hair, who, it turned out, had faithfully attended the trial and been keeping her fingers crossed for Bill, raised their glasses: "To the Horse Principle!"

Jen didn't quite get the Horse Principle, so Billy started to explain it to her but then got distracted by what Bill was saying to Kyle—couldn't the guy just shut up? "... planted the other tennis shoe on purpose from a look-alike but different brand just to mislead the police and sabotage any court case that made use of the shoe as evidence. Queer evidence to queer a whole trial. I mentioned this theory to Sherwood once. Think he appreciated it? Hell, no."

Wow. Look how round everyone's eyes were getting.

"And you have to wonder where the other other shoe is. The *other* other shoe? You know? He buys two look-alike pairs, plants the Red Ball Herring out there in the cattails, ha ha ha, right? Keeps the shoestring from the cattail sneaker as a keepsake, a little toy that also is part of the setup. Then he puts the mate to the sneaker on Angel's foot back in the shoebox with the mate to the one that's out on the cattail and returns them to the store. What the hell, they look exactly alike. Some other kid is probably wearing them right now. Wow. Think about that!"

They didn't want to. Although, nobody could think about anything else either. Nobody was saying anything. Looking anybody in the eye. Bill lit up another Camel with a paper match and in the remains of the flame set fire to a small slip of white paper he'd been playing with. It had started out as a very small, hard wad of paper, from where he had produced it nobody had noticed. He'd been unrolling, straightening, pressing, and smoothing it out as he talked, so that now they could see, as he held it burning over the ashtray with his fingertips, that it was a cash register receipt. From The Big Barn, where they have ev-

everything: groceries, tires, clothes, shoes. From down low, her eyes at about the level of the ashtray as she sank farther into the lee of Triplette's hulk, Jen had the best view.

"The sign of the devil!" she managed, in a genuine whisper.

Gwyn's eyes zinged around the table from her husband to her brother to Billy Triplette, none of whom were willing to look back. Finally it was Kyle who spoke: "So what you're saying, Bill, is—"

"Nothing! He's saying nothing!"

Before anyone could stop her, Gwyn lunged across the table and began garroting her brother with his own necktie, cinching it up smartly as if it were a practiced move. Billy Triplette grasped her wrist and methodically extricated his client's tie, asking as he did, talking a little loud in order to be heard over the guttural noises Gwyn was making, determined to lighten up the conversation, get some closure, get himself the hell out of there sometime within the next ten, hell, five minutes:

"So, Bill, what's next for you, my friend? Back to the highway department? Or maybe a well-deserved tropical vacation, hmm?"

"Actually," Bill said, "I've been thinking about going to truck drivers' school."

# UNSOLVED

Robert Kesling

*Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?*

*The answer will appear in the July/August issue.*

A stiff wind had blown onshore all day, bringing rain to all the British Columbia coastal cities. On that damp November evening, Chief Inspector McDougall settled back before the glowing fireplace with a new mystery novel. He had picked it up at the local bookstore on the way home, intrigued by the title: *The Great Prince George Robbery*. He wondered if the book was all fiction, for the actual robbery had baffled him and the rest of the Prince George police force. He had never heard of the author, Jeanine Thatcher, but that was probably a pseudonym anyhow.

It had been daring. One lone gunman had known just when the British Columbia Ferry office closed for the day. He must also have known when a crate of valuable electronic equipment would be in the warehouse awaiting shipment.

The head secretary had left to lock up the office that night. She was on her way out when a stranger, masked and brandishing a gun, had suddenly materialized. According to her account, the man spun her around and clapped a gloved hand over her mouth. "Any noise and you're dead," he had growled. In minutes he had bound and gagged her. He dumped her purse onto the floor and scooped up the keys.

Soon she heard a truck backing up to the warehouse next door, then the heavy metal door was swung up. Minutes later (not more than five, the secretary estimated), the truck pulled away. The warehouse watchman was later found unconscious. He had been slugged from behind.

No clues could be found to either the identity of the robber or the whereabouts of the missing crate. That's where things stood.

McDougall began reading. The first two chapters were essentially a rehash of details reported in the media. He was tempted to lay the book aside, figuring it was another writer trying to cash in on a sensational current event.

Then he started the third chapter and his interest suddenly perked up. Here were details that the police had kept from the public. Obviously, the author had inside knowledge. Who was she? Her exact description of weather conditions at the time pointed to someone who had been on the scene. Perhaps, the detective reasoned, he could get

a lead on her identity from the publisher, Mister Mystery, Ltd., of Toronto. He sent off a fax requesting information.

Back came the reply: "It is against our company policy to divulge names and addresses of our writers. It is a time-honoured tradition of confidentiality of sources. We can, however, tell you that we currently have five authors, all women, including Mrs. Davis. One is named Ida. All are married, and each author comes from a different Canadian city; one is from Prince George. It will not violate our inflexible rules to keep addresses and actual names secret if we list the amounts of royalties we paid to these five women this year:

(1) The royalties ranged from \$150 to \$500, with no two authors receiving the same amount.

(2) Oscar's wife made more than Heidi, but neither she nor Mrs. Engel earned the most or the least.

(3) Karl's wife, who made twice as much as Mrs. Arbor, earned \$75 more than the author from Quebec.

(4) Both Mrs. Baker and Levi's wife made more than \$150.

(5) Ned's wife got exactly \$100 more than the writer from Sudbury. The woman in Regina made less than Ned's wife, but still was paid exactly \$100 more than Flora.

(6) We paid Mrs. Cruze exactly \$175 more than we paid Mike's wife.

(7) Greta earned more than Jenny, but not as much as the woman from Toronto.

Chief Inspector McDougall pondered this information for several minutes. Then he knew the real name of the woman who had written *The Great Prince George Robbery* based on inside information.

*Who is she?*

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See page 134 for the solution to the May puzzle.

# Too Subtle For Me

Mat Coward





**“F**ind the name and address of the person who’s renting the P.O. box,” said the client, “and keep it to yourself. Simple, yeah?”

“Don’t tell you what I’ve found out?”

“Right.”

“Right,” I said. He’d explained it twice, and I still didn’t get it. “I could,” I pointed out, “simply ask at the post office. They’re obliged to tell you, I believe.”

The client—Barry Irving, a man in his fifties with long grey hair and a short grey beard—shook his head. A chain of beads around his neck rattled. “No, no good. I’m pretty sure she’s given the post office false details.”

“All right,” I said, and wrote down false details in my notebook. “And do you have any kind of description of the person you’re looking for?”

“It’s a woman,” he said.

I wrote down woman. “Well, that’s a start.”

He nodded. “It’s a start. Yeah.”

He was looking at me hard. There was a question he wanted to ask me, but he didn’t know how to phrase it politely. To save time I answered it for him. “I’m twenty-three,” I said. “I look younger, but I’m actually twenty-three. I’ve been working as a private detective for one year.”

“Okay,” said Irving. “That’s cool. And do you, like, own the agency?”

“Well, the office is rented. As a matter of fact, so is the furniture.” I looked around me. “Except for the umbrella stand. That belongs to my grandmother.”

He looked at the umbrella stand. He didn’t look at it long because there wasn’t much of it. It wasn’t a fancy umbrella stand. “It’s very nice,” he said.

“Thank you. I have it on indefinite loan. I’m a sole trader, Mr. Irving. Just me.”

He nodded. His beads bounced. “Cool.”

“Let me make sure I’ve got things straight,” I said, writing cool in my notebook. “You want me to identify the person who rents box 171 at the post office in Cork Street.”

“It’s actually behind the post office—that’s where you collect the post from. There’s an entrance next to the sorting office.”

“All right. You know that this person is a woman—”

“Sure. A woman, definitely.”

“—and that she always collects her mail on Thursday afternoons. But you don’t know, or don’t wish to tell me, anything else. Like, what your interest in this person is, or what she’s up to, or . . . anything?”

He thought about that. His beads kept still. “I don’t have to discuss my motivation with you, do I?”

“No, not at all. Provided you’re not asking me to break the law, or planning to use the information I provide you with to break the law, then no—you don’t have to tell me anything.”

Irving smiled. “Then that’s cool.”

"But it doesn't make my job any easier, I have to say."

He shrugged, and his beads shrugged with him. "With respect, Mr. Walker, that's not really my problem."

The next day was Wednesday. At ten fifteen in the morning, I entered the post office box office via the door next to the sorting office and rang the bell marked PLEASE RING FOR ATTENTION. After three minutes a man wearing a turban and a postman's tunic appeared behind the counter. I assumed he was also wearing trousers, but I couldn't see his legs from where I was standing.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," he said. "What can I do you for?"

"Actually, I think I'm in the wrong place. I wanted to get a passport application form."

He leaned across the counter and pointed through the door I'd just come in by. "Yeah, you need the post office proper. This is the sorting office. Go back out, turn left, you'll see there's a little path there. You follow that, turn left again, and there you are."

"Thanks. Sorry to trouble you."

"No problem. Enjoy your holiday."

My recce of the P.O. box place had shown me, as I had expected, that it was not somewhere where I would be able to loiter inconspicuously. It was too small and not busy enough. The boxes themselves weren't on display, so presumably the addressee Rang For Attention, showed some sort of identification, and waited while the post was fetched.

On leaving the office, I didn't take the helpful man's advice about how to find the main post office entrance. I already had a passport. Instead, I scouted out the surrounding area, looking for a spot from which I might observe the comings and goings of the box holders.

I guessed that the employees' car park immediately behind the P.O. box entrance would be quiet enough, except during shift changes. Towards the back of the tarmac there was a large tree. I didn't know what sort of tree it was—I know regrettably little about trees—but I noticed that there were no vehicles parked immediately beneath it. On inspecting the ground, I discovered why: the tree shed some kind of sticky substance, which would make a mess of a car's windscreen and paintwork. When I returned the following day at eleven thirty A.M., therefore, I made for the sticky tree and set up my observation point at its base, from where I had a decent view of the door in question but was reasonably well hidden by surrounding shrubbery.

Mr. Irving had said that the target always collected her post on Thursday afternoons—he'd been unable or unwilling to be more precise—and I'd established that the office closed at five thirty. I had with me a packet of cheese and pickle sandwiches, a large bottle of mineral water, and an empty mineral water bottle. It was a warm summer afternoon, so I didn't bother with any protective clothing, though I did, of course, bring

that item known as the private eye's best friend—the umbrella. If anyone saw me, they'd probably think I was a schoolkid bunking off school. Except that I don't smoke.

During the first three hours of my observation, seven people entered the P.O. box office, presumably to collect their mail. Two of the seven emerged empty-handed. One of the two wore a face filled with fury and muttered angrily to himself as he left. Seven of the seven were men. I took photographs of every comer and goer with my digital camera.

Two more hours passed, during which I yawned forty-three times and urinated once. I was glad I hadn't brought a book, as by now I would have been bored enough to read it and therefore possibly miss the arrival of the target. I did consider using my WAP phone to look up sticky trees on the Internet, but that's not really what I bought it for.

At four thirty-seven P.M. a woman entered the office. She was about sixty, smartly dressed, and wearing sunglasses. Five minutes later she left the office carrying several large envelopes.

I waited until she was on the high street—it's not a good idea for young men to approach old women on secluded pathways—and then I called after her.

"Excuse me!" I jogged up to her as she turned round. I panted a little, for effect, and slapped at my chest a couple of times. I also blushed. The blushing wasn't something I had control over, but it was probably quite helpful even so. "Excuse me, but I think you dropped this."

"Me?"

I showed her an A4 buff envelope, which I had stuffed the night before with circulars advertising digital television and invisible hearing aids. "That is you, I presume—post office box 171?"

"Oh no, I'm 208." She showed me one of her envelopes by way of proof. It was addressed to Ms. J. Sands, P.O. Box 208, Cork Street.

"Oh dear—how embarrassing!" I rolled my eyes and blushed some more.

"Not at all."

"I just saw the envelope on the floor back there, and I saw you carrying a pile of envelopes, and I just assumed . . . oh well, I suppose I'll just hand it in at the post office."

"Yes, I should. They'll know what to do with it."

"Right. Well—sorry to have troubled you."

She smiled. "Not at all. It was very kind of you."

When I got back to my tree, I wrote down Ms. Sands' name and box number in my notebook. I ate another sandwich.

I didn't have to wait long for the next female customer to turn up. This one was middle-aged, quite fat, and dressed for jogging. She was wearing sleek-looking running shoes, but I reckoned I could catch her if I had to. In the event, I caught her up without breaking into a sweat. She too denied being box 171, though she didn't volunteer her correct number,

or let me get a clear sight of the sole envelope she was carrying. She wasn't very friendly at all, in fact.

By closing time those two were the only women I'd seen collecting mail. I wasn't surprised that neither of them had turned out to be the target, since neither of them had been in possession of the large, tartan envelope I had posted to P.O. box 171 two days earlier.

I was, on the other hand, a little concerned at the target's apparent absence. It was possible that I'd missed her while I'd been accosting the two false alarms, but if so, she must have been in and out of the sorting office in a hurry. Which, of course, she might well be if her business there was of a nefarious nature.

I was wondering about this—and also about the more curious aspects of my client's instructions—while I hid in the shrubbery behind the sticky tree, allowing the five thirty shift change a chance to disperse before I went home. It was fortunate that I took this precaution.

At five thirty-five P.M. a young woman—by far the youngest I'd seen today, and of a somewhat distinctive appearance—arrived at the P.O. box office door in a hurry. She'd clearly run some distance, and her panting was altogether more convincing than mine had been. She rattled the door and discovered it locked. She read the notice affixed to the door, which declared the office's opening hours; then she rattled the door again. She looked at her watch. She swore, loudly. She banged at her own head with balled fists, though not very hard. She kicked the door and swore again, even more loudly than before.

From around the side of the building a postal worker appeared. It was the same turbaned man I'd spoken to the previous day. I was too far away to hear much of the subsequent conversation, beyond the odd word the woman spoke at full volume, but the gist was not difficult to determine. She pointed at her watch several times, and he shook his head on an equal number of occasions. She raised her hands above her head and looked incredulous. He shrugged. She pointed at the locked door, and he pointed at the sign.

She departed, still shaking her head in disgust or disbelief. He read the sign through once more, nodded to himself, and disappeared back where he'd come from. By the time all was quiet again and I felt it safe to come out from behind my tree, mount my moped, and ride it to the high street, there was no sign of the young woman. Before heading home, I used my mobile phone to send a text message and an e-mail to my client, Mr. Irving. Both asked the same question: "As far as you know, does the woman I'm looking for have a shaved head and rings through her nose?"

I didn't know how rigid the target's habit of collecting her mail only on Thursdays might be. Perhaps that was the only day of the week on which she could possibly get to her box. I hoped not because if it was I was in for a long, dull Friday.

This time, I arrived at the sticky tree very early, before the office opened. In addition to my mineral water, empty bottle, and sandwiches, I had a flask of black tea and several slices of my grandmother's oat surprise. (If you ask her what the surprise is, she replies, "Nothing. You don't get many surprises with oats.")

There had been no reply so far to my query concerning the nose rings. I wasn't really expecting one. Mr. Irving either didn't know what the target looked like or else he knew and didn't want to tell me. For whatever reason.

My secret hope was that the young woman with the shaved head would turn up as soon as the office opened, eager to complete her frustrated mission; that she would leave carrying a large tartan envelope full of pamphlets outlining the advantages of thermal underwear; and that I would be able to follow her discreetly on my moped. Having thus discovered her name and address, I would have fulfilled my unorthodox commission.

When the first female caller at the office was the fat jogger from the previous day, I logged her in my notebook, but other than that thought nothing of it. Presumably, quite a lot of people emptied their P.O. boxes on a daily basis. In any case, she was followed within seconds by the young woman—I put her at about my age, or a few years older—with the shaven head and the nose rings. I made myself ready to move, which primarily involved swallowing a large but unsurprising mouthful of oats, putting my notebook in my pocket, and picking up my bag.

The two women were inside the building for just over four minutes, and they came out of it simultaneously—or at least, as simultaneously as a fat woman and a woman with nose rings can go through an ordinary-sized doorway. I crouched, ready to make a run for my moped as soon as they were out of sight. Which was when I noticed that the middle-aged jogger, not the young razorhead, was carrying the tartan envelope.

I had been so certain until then that the young woman was the target that for a moment I wasn't sure what to do, which woman to trail. After a moment's consideration, however, I decided that, when in doubt, one should always follow the thermal underwear.

She was on foot, which made it harder to follow her, but easier not to lose her. I mean that it is difficult, when mounted on a moped, to tail a pedestrian without being obvious but that at least they are not likely to get away from you.

I didn't dare dump the bike in case she suddenly got into a car or cab or onto a bus. Or, indeed, onto a moped. In any profession there are certain mistakes which one makes only once.

As they proceeded down the high street with me wobbling along behind them, it seemed possible that the two women knew each other; from behind, and at a distance, it was hard to tell whether they were talking as they walked, but they could have been.

After a couple of minutes the young woman went into a shoeshop while the middle-aged one kept walking. I'd already made my decision: I was following the fat jogger. She had the tartan envelope, so she must be the holder of box 171. I could only suppose that the reason she hadn't had the envelope yesterday was that it had been delayed in the post, despite the fact that I'd posted it in the post office attached to the sorting office and therefore its journey had been one of approximately twenty yards.

The fat jogger turned off the high street after a couple of minutes and into a residential street consisting mostly of Victorian houses converted into flats. A third of the way along this road she let herself into one such house.

I wrote down the address in my notebook. There were no names on the doorbells, and I couldn't risk speaking to the woman in case she recognized me from the previous day, so I would have to get her name the slow way—by checking the electoral register, and then cross-checking via an Internet search.

I was riding off to do just that when I saw the nose-rings girl come out of the shoeshop. Despite her shaven head and her rather grubby-looking leather jacket, she was quite an attractive young woman. I noticed that she had legs, eyes, a bottom, and so on; all those things which, in my opinion, make most women quite attractive. I decided that I might as well follow her, too, just to be thorough. It was the professional thing to do.

It didn't take long. She walked directly to the same house the other woman had entered—and entered it herself, using a key.

Well. Mother and daughter? This was interesting but, strictly speaking, none of my business. Mr. Irving had hired me to find out the name and address of the woman who rented P.O. Box 171, Cork Street. I had the address; I would soon have the name. End of job.

When I got back to my office, I worked at the computer for a while, and then phoned the client on his mobile—I didn't have a home number for him—and told him that I had identified the target. I had photographs of her. Would he like to see them? I could bring them round now.

"No, no! Not necessary. You've done what I asked you to do, that's cool. You keep the photos, all right? Keep them in your office."

"Well, okay. I'll send you my bill, then."

I could hear birds singing in the background on his end of the line. He was speaking quietly, so I wasn't sure I heard him correctly when he said, "Are you absolutely sure?"

"Well, yes," I said. "I always send a bill."

"No, like—are you absolutely sure you've got the right woman?"

"Mr. Irving, I sent her a distinctive envelope, I saw her collect it, I followed her home, I saw her open the front door with a key, and I checked her name on the electoral register and double-checked on the Internet. I am sure, Mr. Irving. I am competent." And I am older than I look, I didn't add.



"Sure, yeah, that's cool—it's just that you sent me that weird e-mail. I was worried that you were, like, losing your focus."

"The girl with the shaven head?" I wasn't sure how to tell him about her without actually telling him anything—as per his instructions. "Forget about her, Mr. Irving. False alarm."

I heard a female voice in Mr. Irving's hinterland, competing with the birds. "Okay," said the client, "That's cool. Got to go." He went.

I sat at my desk for a while, trying to work it out.

Mr. Irving hired me to collect some information, under strict orders that I was not to tell him what I discovered. This was a first in my experience as a private detective. If he didn't want my information, then he must already have it. So why was I hired? An unpleasant thought crept up on me. If his intentions towards Diane Eden, the fat jogger, were heinous, then perhaps I was to be his alibi. Through me he could prove—albeit in a somewhat circuitous fashion—that he didn't know her identity.

If so, why would he wish to harm her; what was she to him? The obvious answer—she was a blackmailer. She was a lover or ex-lover, and she was threatening to tell his wife.

It was none of my business. The job was done. All I had to do was send the bill. But a reputable private detective does not turn a blind eye to crime, or potential crime. It would be unprofessional. Besides, I really wanted to know who that shaven-headed girl was.

That evening on my computer, and the following day on my moped, I checked up on my client. I found that Mr. Irving worked as an accountant—not, as his appearance and manner might have suggested, as a rock promoter—and that he lived in an unexceptionally nice house in a quiet street with his wife and dogs. The dogs were named Hendrix and Dylan. They had two children (Mr. and Mrs. Irving, I mean), both of whom were in their thirties, neither of whom lived with their parents.

My blackmail theory was getting firmer, and I was getting nervous. I needed to know what the connection was between the client and the target and whether it was something I would have to tell the police about.

From the back of a borrowed van parked near the Irvings' house, I took some photos of my client with my digital camera. I returned the van, rode back to my office, and printed out the best of the pictures.

At four that afternoon I rode to Diane Eden's street and rang her buzzer. The younger woman answered. I didn't know her name because she wasn't on the electoral register.

"Good afternoon," I said. "I'm sorry to trouble you, but I'm a—"

"I don't have a car," she said.

"Oh. Fine. So—do you need a lift somewhere?"

She sighed and rolled her eyes. I hoped she wouldn't start hitting her head again. "I don't have a car, yeah? So I don't need my car washed. Right?"

"Ah. Right. Actually, I'm not a Boy Scout, and I'm older than I look, and I'm a private detective, and I—"

She laughed. "You're a what?"

I felt a blush starting. It occurred to me that I would be very happy to be old and bald and wrinkly if it meant I no longer blushed. "I'm a private detective, and I—"

She shook her head and began to close the door. "We're a bit busy now, kid. Family conference."

I took the photo of Mr. Irving out of my pocket. "I'm trying to trace this man. He's not in any trouble or anything, in fact it's to do with a bequest, and I understand he used to live in this street. You see, I'm a private detective, and I—"

She looked at the photo, looked at me as if I'd just turned into a hobgoblin before her eyes, and shouted behind her into the hall. "Mum!"

The voice of Diane Eden called back, "I heard—you'd better bring him in."

The shaven-headed daughter took hold of my arm and steered me through the first door on the left. We were in the small entrance hall of a small and rather dark flat. The door slammed behind me, revealing the fat jogger herself. She was wearing a tracksuit. She had her right hand in her right trouser pocket. From the outline, it was obvious that the hand was gripping something solid. Solid and dangerous.

"Get in there," she said, indicating the living room with a nod of her head.

"Is that a pleased-to-see-me in your pocket," I said, "or are you just gun?" I blush when I'm nervous. Until then I didn't know that I also gabble when I'm terrified.

"Keith Walker—what the hell are you doing here?"

My client sat in a deep armchair at the far side of the room. At first I thought he was tied up, but then I realized this was merely an illusion of body language; he was sitting in the chair as if he were tied to it. His eyes met mine briefly, but for the most part they were busy staring at Ms. Eden's bulging pocket.

"You know this kid?" she said.

I tried to explain. "I'm a private detective, and I—"

"You're a what?"

Her daughter said, "He's older than he looks, apparently."

"Well, he'd have to be, wouldn't he? Otherwise he'd be an egg. So what," said Ms. Eden, jerking her chin at Mr. Irving, "is a private detective doing looking for him?"

"Actually," I said, "I'm not."

The daughter poked me in the back with a finger. "You said you were."

"So," said Diane Eden, "not only are you younger than you look, you're less honest, too."

Mr. Irving groaned, and his beads shook. "He was working for me."

"What are you talking about?"

"I hired him so that if you killed me—"

"Killed you?"

"—an independent witness would be able to tell the cops what was going on."

"Kill you?" Her grip, it seemed to me, tightened on the hard object in her pocket.

My client sat up a little straighter in his chair. "Yeah, so think about that, Diane. My man Walker here has photos of you collecting mail from your P.O. box. Got them in his office safe, haven't you, Keith?"

"Right," I said, thinking this was not the moment to mention that my office didn't have a safe.

"I didn't hire you to save my life, Keith, but that's cool. We'll have to talk about a bonus."

The daughter was staring at her mother. The mother waved her free hand in front of her as if shooing flies. Silly flies. "You melodramatic old fool, Barry, why would I want to kill you?"

"Well," said Mr. Irving, "you know. Because, like, you'd been driven mad over the years by bitter jealousy. On account of me dumping you. And, like, if you couldn't have me then no one could."

"Men, my God! What do you take me for? I'm not a murderer. I was blackmailing you, that's all."

His beads rattling softly, my client screwed up his face in puzzlement. "Blackmailing me? What about?"

Diane Eden pointed at the shaven-headed girl. "About your illegitimate daughter, of course. I was threatening to tell your wife. Didn't you get my letters?"

"Yeah, but they were a little, you know, obscure."

"They were supposed to be! They were blackmail letters."

He pulled at his beard for a moment. This seemed to calm him. "But my wife already knows. Always has done. In fact," he said, smiling at his daughter, "she's really keen to meet you, sweetheart."

The daughter stuck both hands in the front pockets of her very tight jeans, and said, "As if. Sod that."

"What do you do for a living, love?" asked Mr. Irving.

"She's been traveling," said her mother. "But now she's back, which is why I needed extra money."

Mr. Irving made a sympathetic face. "Unemployed, huh? That's tough."

"Am I, hell!" The girl took her hands out of her pockets. "As a matter of fact, I'm a roadie."

"A roadie?" He leaned forward, his eyes wide. "What, like, for a band?"

"No, actually," she sneered. "Like, for the queen. I set up the thrones before all her big gigs, make sure her corgis have the right color of dog biscuits in their dressing rooms."

Mr. Irving nodded. His beads danced. "What sort of band?"

Avoiding eye contact with her mother, the shaven-headed girl said, "At the moment I'm with a sort of bluesy-punky outfit."

"Bluesy-punky . . . wow, cool."

She ran her hands over her stubbly scalp. "Yeah. With a kind of reggae-cum-Bach thing going on in there, too."

"Right, right," said Mr. Irving, nodding with his whole body now. "Totally cool."

"Never mind all that," said Diane Eden. "If you didn't know I was black-mailing you, why did you keep sending me padded envelopes full of used fivers?"

Irving shrugged. "Well, you know—maintenance payments. Child support. I've always felt bad about abandoning you when you were pregnant, so this was my chance to make it up to my lovely daughter."

"Maintenance payments? You idiot!" She was jogging round in little circles, kicking bits of furniture and thumping the walls with her free hand. Obviously a hereditary thing. "You insensitive, unimaginative, brainless little—"

"One good thing," I put in. "I don't think you can be done for blackmail if your victim doesn't even know he's being blackmailed. I mean, he wouldn't make much of a prosecution witness, would he?"

I spoke in the hope of quieting things down. It worked but not very well. The fat jogger looked at me, then looked at my client, and then said, very quietly, "You know what I'm going to do now, you hopeless little worm? Worms, plural, in fact." She began wrestling to free the hard object from her pocket. The track suit was slightly too small for her.

"I knew it!" said Mr. Irving.

"Mum!" said the daughter.

"Gun got a she's!" I said, and started blushing again.

The pocket ripped. Diane Eden cursed, and dragged her hand free. She waved the dangerous thing at us. It was a mobile phone. "I'm going to call my brother Raymond. You remember Raymond? He's going to sort you out like he should have done years ago." She started dialing.

"It's not a gun," I said.

"Run!" said Mr. Irving. "Run for it!"

I ran. We ran. We didn't stop for ages. Mr. Irving's beads rattled so hard they fell off.

In a pub a taxi ride away, my client and I drank brandy.

"Did you really think she was going to kill you?"

"Well," said Barry Irving, "it did cross my mind when she got in touch. Di was one crazy lady back when I knew her. That was part of the attraction, I guess."

"But she didn't actually threaten you?"

"I thought she was threatening me in her letters—subtly, you know. Without incriminating herself in writing."

"Whereas, in fact, she was subtly blackmailing you."

He laughed. "Too subtle for me."

"And my role was to provide you with a means of justice from beyond the grave."

He nodded. "Hey, but it had nothing to do with revenge, you know. I was only thinking of my wife. Didn't want her to spend her widowhood wondering what had happened, always looking over her shoulder."

I drank some brandy. "All right. I can see why you didn't go to the police—you didn't think you had enough to show them, and anyway you didn't want to involve your wife—but couldn't you have told everything to your lawyer? So that in the event of your sudden death—"

"My lawyer is my wife's brother. Anyway, you're cheaper."

"So why didn't you want me to tell you the information you hired me to find out?"

Mr. Irving smiled. "Simple, kid—I wanted to reduce to an absolute minimum the possibility of you ringing me at home, my wife answering, and you blurting out that I'd hired a private eye."

That didn't make sense. "But if your wife already knew about your daughter . . . oh I see. Your wife didn't know."

He spread his hands. "Don't look so shocked, Keith. Telling the whole truth to the people we love is not always the coolest thing to do. You'll understand that when you're older."

When you work as a private detective, the ethical standards of your clients are not your concern. You concern yourself with facts and with the law, not with other people's morals. "Sure," I said. "That's cool."

It was only later, on the bus home, that I realized there was one question I hadn't asked him. Why had he gone round to Diane Eden's flat if he thought she harbored homicidal intentions towards him? By the end of my journey I'd figured out the answer. Barry Irving had known from the start that he was being blackmailed, not threatened with violence. He had gone there to tell her that he wouldn't be paying her any more. That he'd hired a private detective, who had gathered evidence against her, and that he would use it if she didn't disappear out of his life. He knew that my report and photos would always be available to him, should he ever need them.

Nobody had been planning to kill anybody after all. This was just an ordinary, suburban case of a blackmailer being blackmailed.

But Mr. Irving hadn't reckoned on his ex-lover's raw anger. Or on the ominous bulge of her mobile phone. Or, perhaps, on the shock of seeing his firstborn child for the first time ever. And he certainly hadn't reckoned on me turning up on my moped, and—

My moped.

Hoping to avoid embarrassing confrontations, I waited till dark before I went back to Ms. Eden's house to collect it. I needn't have bothered. The shaven-headed girl was sitting on the stoop smoking a cigarette.

"Hi," I said. She tilted her chin at me, very slightly, by way of greeting. "Been an interesting day," I said.

She shrugged.

I persevered. I have read that women like men who can make conversation. "Why does your mother always collect her post on Thursday afternoons?"

"What?" she said.

"It's not important, I was just wondering—"

"It's her afternoon off. She works as a hairdresser's assistant. Works every hour she can get. She's broke, in case you hadn't noticed."

"Right." A silence followed. "So, I was wondering—"

"Isn't it past your bedtime?"

"You've got a P.O. box, too?"

"So?"

"I just wondered why. I mean, I know why your mum had one, but—"

"Sometimes the post gets stolen from the communal hall here." She smoked for a moment, pulling hard on the cigarette, but letting the smoke escape carelessly through the sides of her mouth. Then she added as if to herself, "Least, that's what she told me."

She stood up, extinguished her cigarette on the doorstep, and turned to go inside. Now or never, I thought.

"I'd really like to see your band sometime."

She looked at me over her shoulder and said, "Well, if we're doing any matinees, sonny, I'll send you a ticket."

I still didn't know her name. I got on my moped and rode home.

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FICTION

# Death and Cherry Blossoms

I. J. Parker



Illustration by Linda Weatherly

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**H** EIAN-KYO (KYOTO), ELEVENTH CENTURY (JAPAN), DURING THE FLOWERY MONTH (MAY).

In the courtyards of the imperial palaces, cherry trees bloomed and nightingales sang as beautiful court ladies and handsome courtiers wrote passionate verses to each other.

Just beyond the palace walls, the business of the government took precedence over the amusements of spring and young love. Akitada, junior clerk in the Ministry of Justice, toiled away in semidarkness among the dull dossiers of ancient court cases. A punitive assignment this, because he had once again disobeyed and meddled in a criminal investigation when his proper sphere was estate law.

But on this day his dusty labors were interrupted by a summons from the minister himself, a summons that was about to catapult him once again into murder.

The minister, Soga Ietada, a fat man with bushy hair and brows, preferred the cultivated pleasures of aristocratic life to his civil service duties. He particularly resented young troublemakers like Akitada, whose ancient family and top honors at the university had earned him a post in his ministry.

Because he knew this, Akitada's hands were clammy when he entered the great man's office. As he knelt and bowed deeply, he wondered what new offense had been discovered and what additional punishment awaited him.

"Sugawara," Soga said, "I am sending you into the country with

some legal documents to witness the principals' signatures. You are to leave immediately."

"Yes, your honor. Where am I going?"

"To Kiyowara's summer villa on the Katsura River. His daughter is marrying Lord Kose's son. You will take the settlement papers to them."

Kiyowara Toyashi was the minister's close friend and an imperial counselor of the junior fourth rank. Meeting him was an intimidating prospect for someone as young as Akitada. But it was offset by the trip to the Katsura River in springtime. Akitada's face lit up.

Soga regarded him sourly. "Remember, this is strictly business. Watch your manners. I don't want to hear any more complaints about you. And change into something decent. You look positively grimy. You own a horse, I trust?"

"Yes, your honor." Akitada did not, but he would rent one. Brushing at the dust on his threadbare robe, he asked, "Are there any instructions about the settlements?"

"No. You will do precisely as Lord Kiyowara tells you. You may leave."

The cherry trees surrounding the pavilions, galleries, and courtyards of Kiyomara's villa were in full, snowy bloom, gilded now by the setting sun. Here, too, the nightingales sang, mingling their notes with the tranquil sound of the slow-moving river beyond the garden.

Once the legal business was completed, Lord Kiyowara invited Akitada to spend the night before returning to the capital. Since he had

been instructed to do as Kiyowara suggested, Akitada stayed, attending a festive banquet that evening. After a sumptuous feast, Kiyowara and his guests took turns at some extemporaneous verses in praise of marriage and cherry blossoms.

This threw Akitada into a school-boy's panic. High honors at the university and employment in the ministry had not helped him compose romantic poetry, a grave fault in an age which valued such things more than learning or character. To make matters worse, his host's brother, already half drunk, had recited some highly salacious verses about the bride's physical charms just before it was Akitada's turn. Unable to think of some passable lines, Akitada was still flushing to the roots of his hair when the first scream shattered the evening calm.

Beyond the open doors of the banquet room lay the gardens and the women's quarters. The screaming came from there, a steady stream of "aiiihs," gathering other voices to gain in volume, like a fire on a dry straw roof.

The six men jumped to their feet, momentarily speechless. Across the gardens the screams died into a buzz of excited women's voices.

"What happened?" cried Kose Masanobu, the bridegroom.

Lord Kiyowara frowned and clapped his hands for a servant. "Please do not concern yourselves, gentlemen. The women are easily frightened by mice in the country. No doubt it was just a silly maid. Please forgive the interruption."

The groom's father, the wealthy Kose Yoshiari, looked dubious. "We

had better go and see that everything is all right."

"Ah, I see what worries you," said their host, smiling at young Masanobu. "Come along! It will not amount to much, but by all means reassure yourselves of her safety."

Perhaps the invitation was only for the Koses, father and son, but the other two members of the party, the host's brother Tadahira and the family tutor Akimitsu, trailed along.

Akitada, the only real outsider, hesitated, then followed also.

In the garden the blossoming branches hung ghostlike in the gathering dusk, their whiteness a mysterious veil against the encroaching night.

When they reached the bamboo gate to the women's quarters, a male servant shot through. "My lord," he gasped, sliding to his knees before Kiyowara, "The Lady Umeko has killed herself."

The Lady Umeko was Kiyowara's daughter and Masanobu's intended bride.

Kiyowara roughly pushed the servant out of his way and rushed towards the nearest pavilion. A group of sobbing maids clustered around the open door on the verandah.

Following with the others, Akitada smelled it first. Blood—the scent of death: cloying, sickening, hot, unmistakable. His stomach lurched.

The maids moved aside so they could see into the room. A single large candle was burning in a tall stand. Under it, on a thick grass mat, lay the young woman. She wore a beautiful gown of many-lay-

ered silks in shades of pink, rose, and soft green, and her long glossy hair made black ripples and waves across the voluminous pale folds. But her life's blood had poured from the slashed throat and formed another, more horrible, pattern in crimson across her chest and the front of her skirt. She had fallen on her left side, her legs drawn up a little because she had been kneeling. Incongruously, a silver mirror and ivory comb lay near her as if she had been rearranging her hair.

Akitada felt a great surge of pity for the young woman, soon to have been a bride. Beside him, Masanobu suddenly turned away retching. His father went to help him.

The dead girl's father stood frozen in stunned disbelief. "Umeko!" he whispered. "Oh no! It cannot be." Turning away abruptly, he came face to face with Akitada.

"I am deeply sorry, my lord," Akitada said nervously. Seeing the older man's blank look of shock, he offered, "Would you allow me to make certain she is . . . beyond help?"

Covering his face, Kiyowara nodded.

Akitada stepped into the room gingerly. So much blood! It had splashed widely, drenching mirror, makeup boxes, and painted screens with its crimson surge. It covered the front of the young woman's gown and her sleeves, and it had soaked into the grass mat on which she lay, turning its pale green fibers the color of maple leaves in autumn.

Akitada knelt beside the young woman to touch her cheek. She was still faintly warm, and the blood

still flowed, very slowly, from the gaping wound just beneath her chin. Moving his fingers below her ear, he could feel no pulse. The wound looked horribly like another mouth, vomiting forth life. She had been pretty, this young bride of eighteen, in the way that young women of ordinary appearance suddenly become quite lovely at that age. Akitada glanced around the luxurious room and then out at her stricken father, who still averted his face.

"I am very sorry, my lord," he said rising. "The Lady Umeko is dead."

Kiyowara turned a ravaged face toward him. "Oh my poor child! How could this happen? She was to be married this very night."

"Look for yourself, my lord," Akitada said. Reluctantly, the father approached and Akitada pointed to the young woman's right hand.

It lay flung out, partly covered by the long, bloodstained sleeve of her gown. The fingers curled loosely around the handle of a razor, the type women use to shave their eyebrows and hairline. The blade was covered with blood.

Kiyowara gave a half-choking cry, then turned abruptly and ran. A soft murmur passed through the women gathered outside. The two Koses followed, the father supporting the son, and Kiyowara's brother stumbled drunkenly after them.

Only the tutor remained, kneeling at the edge of the verandah, his face in his hands, his shoulders shaking with sobs. Akitada went to him, touching the young man's arm. He started to his feet, groaned, and staggered away.

Akitada had seen violent death before. It always moved him profoundly. But always the emotional shock passed into something else, a need to acknowledge the victim's life by knowing fully the circumstances of the death. He turned now to look again at the scene of this tragic suicide, wondering why a beautiful young woman on the threshold of a full and privileged life would turn her face towards darkness.

The contrast between the dainty furnishings and the gory scene was painful. The sliding doors to the verandah and the small, private garden stood wide open. Outside, one of the flowering cherries stretched its laden branches over bamboo fencing, and in an alcove stood more flowering branches in a large jar. The candlelight turned the white blossoms faintly golden, but outside, in the falling darkness, the splendor had faded into an insubstantial haze.

The poetess Komachi, in her old age, had written, "The cherry blossoms have passed away, their color gone; age takes my beauty as it fades in the long rain of my regrets." Lady Umeko would never lose her youth now. Even before she had lived it, her life had become too sad to bear.

Akitada looked for that life in the room of painted screens, stacked lacquer clothes chests, musical instruments, dainty porcelain dishes, inlaid writing boxes, carved brush containers, rolled scrolls of illustrated novels and poetry collections, and gilded makeup cases. And he marveled again that, in the midst of

her youth and hours before her marriage to a handsome and wealthy young man, in this pampered comfort of her pretty room and dressed in her loveliest gown, yes, at the very moment when she was combing her hair and looking into her mirror, she should have come to this desperate decision to end her life. It was inexplicable.

His eye came to rest on the toppled mirror. Blood, spurting from the severed neck arteries, had covered its entire polished silver surface. On the crimson ground lay the lovely ivory comb. Ancient symbols of marital harmony, a pair of mandarin ducks swimming among reeds decorated its spine. A marriage gift from Masanobu? How futile its auspicious message seemed now! Not one drop of her blood marred its pale perfection.

One of the poignant symbols of this senseless death, the comb made Akitada vaguely uneasy. It hinted at something else, something requiring a more detached and analytical explanation. And suddenly Akitada knew what was wrong. If she had laid down her comb to take up the razor, the comb should be covered with blood. This was no suicide. No, someone else had stepped behind her as she was combing her hair and had slit her throat. This person had then removed the comb from her lifeless hand and replaced it with the razor, tossing the comb carelessly on the bloody mirror. It had been a cold-blooded murder.

Outside some frightened maid-servants still hovered. He asked, "Who was Lady Umeko's maid?"

They ran away as one young woman came forward and knelt, touching her head to the floor. "This insignificant person is called Otori," she said.

"Did you find your mistress like this, Otori?"

The girl's eyes were wide with horror. "Yes, sir. This person came to help her change her gown."

"Did you touch anything?"

She shook her head violently.

"How long had she been alone in her room?"

"My lady returned after viewing the cherry blossoms with the young lord, but she sent me away to have my supper before getting things ready."

"Getting things ready?"

"For the young lord's arrival."

Akitada flushed. Of course. This night Masanobu was to have consummated the marriage. He remembered seeing the young couple earlier from a distance. They had made a charming picture, moving about the gardens, looking up at the clouds of white cherry blossoms spread against the mountains' hazy blue and the limpid azure sky. Someone had cruelly stopped their union. He asked the girl, "Do you know if she expected a visitor?"

A look of speculation passed over the girl's face, but she shook her head.

"How long have you served your mistress?"

"Four months. Since my lord brought my lady here." She paused. "My lady was not happy here."

"How so?"

Otori raised her shoulders help-

lessly. "Maybe she was homesick—or maybe she didn't want to marry the young lord, sir."

The Lady Umeko had been Kiyowara's child by an earlier marriage and had been reared by her mother's people after the first Lady Kiyowara's death, but this was the first suggestion that the young woman had not welcomed her father's choice of bridegroom. "What makes you think she did not want this marriage?" Akitada asked.

"She cried a lot and was forever writing. Maybe she was fond of someone else."

Again that look of speculation, only this time Akitada knew what she was suggesting. "You mean she loved another man? Someone here, in this house?"

"I can't say."

But there was a smug secretiveness about her, and Akitada persisted. "Can't or won't? Come on, you have some idea, don't you?"

Lowering her eyes modestly, she said, "My lady always sent me away to sleep with the other maids."

The implication was clear and shocked Akitada. "You suspect that she was receiving some man at night?" Sternly, he drew himself up. "Why did you not report this to her parents as was your duty?"

The girl's eyes widened with fear. "I know nothing," she cried. Jumping up, she scurried away into the darkness.

Akitada cursed his foolishness. The girl had crucial information, and he had scared her away. Who was Lady Umeko's secret lover? Had he killed her because he was about to lose her? Or had Masano-



bu discovered the affair and murdered his bride in a fit of rage?

Akitada realized belatedly that he faced a dilemma. If he insisted on reporting this murder, he would expose scandal in the family of Lord Kiyowara who was a notorious stickler for propriety. That would be the final straw for Soga, who would dismiss Akitada instantly. The only safe option was to keep out of the affair and to depart for the capital as soon as possible.

But Akitada was incapable of doing this. After a nervous look around to make sure he was alone, he went into the pavilion to make a quick search for letters or a diary, anything that might provide a clue to her lover or killer. Even this was dangerous. If he, an unrelated young man, were caught pawing through a young noblewoman's private possessions, her father would be justified in having him arrested. But Kiyowara did not know that his daughter had been murdered. Would he prefer it to have been suicide? Surely not; surely he would want her killer caught. Any father would want to know the truth, scandal or not.

The search produced nothing, and that, perversely, seemed to prove a secret and illicit relationship. Dissatisfied, Akitada left, extinguishing the candle and closing the doors to the garden. Then he went in search of Kiyowara.

Kiyowara's private quarters lay in darkness, but from the adjoining guest quarters came the subdued sound of male voices and the glimmer of light. His heart pounding, Akitada stepped on a rock and

peered over the top of the fence. This courtyard was much smaller than Kiyowara's and served only a single room, its doors wide open on the candlelit scene inside.

Lord Kiyowara and his brother sat side by side in conversation. Kiyowara looked dreadful, and his brother wept openly. Akitada felt his heart contract for the two men who shared the loss of a beloved young woman.

This was not the time to add new sorrow, and Akitada returned to the banquet room, where he found the Koses glumly sipping wine. Masanobu was saying angrily, "You recall, sir, that I was against the alliance from the start, but you insisted." The elder Kose saw Akitada and put a warning hand on his son's arm. "Still up, young man?" he asked lightly. "We were about to retire. Let's give the family some peace, shall we?" They got to their feet and, with nods to Akitada, departed.

Akitada wondered. Masanobu had sounded irritated rather than distressed by his bride's death. So the marriage of Lady Umeko to the wealthy Kose had been strictly a matter of expediency, bringing financial benefits to the Kiyowaras and political influence to the Koses. Rumor had it that Kiyowara, though close to the emperor, had suffered grievous financial losses because of border wars and mismanagement of his northern estates. On the other hand, Lord Kose, round-bellied, triple-chinned, and florid, controlled great wealth and wanted his son to rise quickly to political eminence. Handsome

and haughty, Masanobu looked every young woman's romantic dream, but Lady Umeko's father had not chosen him to please her. Neither had Masanobu desired her as his bride.

Akitada wandered into the cherry grove to think about the men in Lady Umeko's life.

The tutor Akimitsu was Akitada's age. He had hardly touched his food or wine during the banquet and had wept freely outside the lady's room. Had Akimitsu been so foolhardy as to carry on an affair with Lady Umeko even as her father was arranging a brilliant match? Kiyowara's rage would have been terrible had he found out. For someone as obsessed with rank and status as he, a liaison between his daughter and a mere tutor would be intolerable.

In that respect the Kiyowaras and the Koses were quite similar. Young Kose, already opposed to the match, would have felt doubly offended by such a betrayal.

But foolish and dangerous as such an affair might be, it was not at all unlikely. Akimitsu, slender, gentle and soulful-eyed, had lived in the same household with a lonely, homesick young woman; he was an accomplished poet, a fact which had not escaped Akitada during the aborted poetry contest, and might have won an impressionable young girl's heart quite easily with his verses.

Akitada gazed up into the darkness which had all but swallowed up the pale blossoms of the trees, and was reminded of Tsurayuki's famous lines: "In the depth of night,

where have the bright blossoms gone? I am cast in grief for her too soon taken by the dark." Had Akimitsu grieved for his beloved? Or had he been overcome by remorse? Had he murdered the lady in a fit of jealousy? Or because he feared she would reveal their relationship to her father?

Impossible to tell. Akitada switched his mind back to the murder scene. The body had still been faintly warm; the blood had not yet congealed. The murder must have happened within an hour or two, roughly during the time of the banquet. Who among the men had left their company? Akimitsu, he recalled, had gone out twice, having been sent to the kitchen with instructions to the staff. But all of them had left the room both before and during the meal. Kiyowara himself had gone to check on the food preparation. And Lord Kose had got up to relieve himself, as had Lord Tadahira, and Akitada himself. Masanobu had wandered off into the gardens just before the poetry contest.

The villa and its grounds remained shrouded in stillness. The Koses had retired to their guest quarters, and the Kiyowara brothers, worn out by grief, were no doubt also asleep. The corpse of Lady Umeko lay forgotten among her pretty things. Suddenly it seemed important to Akitada that she should not be alone in death, and he went back.

Something rustled in the shrubbery of her garden when Akitada opened the gate. The shadows near the wall were too thick to see, but

he felt a prickle of fear at the thought that the killer had returned to the scene of his crime.

"Who is there?" he cried softly, his heart beating. He heard someone breathing heavily. Then the slender figure of Akimitsu stepped from the shadows.

The tutor looked ghastly but seemed peaceable enough. "I did not know anyone would be here," he said, looking past Akitada towards the pavilion.

"Why are *you* here?" Akitada asked.

The other man could have asked the same question, but he turned listless, red-rimmed eyes on Akitada. "I loved her. She killed herself because her father was forcing her to marry that spoiled brat. I will follow her into death as soon as I have seen her one last time." He raised his pale face towards the flowering cherry tree and recited, "Lovely though they are, I shall not see them again: pale cherries in bloom. My heart, crushed by harsh fate, shatters like their blossoms."

Very pretty, thought Akitada unsympathetically. He disliked emotional displays and felt the tutor talked romantic nonsense and was probably putting on an act. He said bluntly, "It was murder, and I am going to find her killer. What precisely was your relationship with the dead lady?"

Akimitsu stared at him. "Murder? We . . . I was employed to teach her about poetry because her education had been sadly neglected. Somehow we . . . fell in love. What do you mean, murder? I saw her. She did it herself." Tears began to

gather in his eyes and spilled down his pale cheeks. "We loved each other hopelessly. When she told me of her marriage to Lord Kose, I was going to leave, but she begged me to stay. She was afraid."

"Afraid? Of Masanobu?"

Akimitsu buried his face in his hands. "Yes. No. I don't know. She would not say! What does it matter now?"

Akitada regarded him with irritation. Sentimental idiot! Such a highly improper relationship had been doomed from the start. Akimitsu's behavior, apart from being reprehensible, had also been foolhardy. Nobody employed a young man in his house who might seduce his daughters.

Akimitsu was edging towards the pavilion. "Please, may I see her one last time?"

"I cannot stop you, but it is not good to see violent death. You would do better to remember her as she was and help me find her killer."

Akimitsu turned tragic eyes to Akitada. "I am no longer of this world but of hers," he said sadly.

Akitada suppressed a snort, and climbed the steps to the verandah to open the door. He located the candle and struck a light. Akimitsu approached the corpse of his beloved reverently. Kneeling beside her, he looked at her face for a long time. Then he reached out and gently brushed a strand of hair from her face. The gesture was both caress and farewell. He bowed, rose, and turned to Akitada. "I shall be forever grateful to you, sir. Good-night."

Akitada followed him out.

"Akimitsu!"

The tutor turned on the steps to the garden.

"You cannot serve her by killing yourself. Help me find her murderer. Tell me about her life here."

Akimitsu hung his head. "She is dead, and that is all that matters. I cannot help you. Her father brought her here four months ago and hired me to teach her. She was unhappy and very lonely, and we were drawn to each other. We both knew there was no hope for us. Lord Kiyowara had decided that she would marry Kose Masanobu." Akimitsu grimaced. "He is a rich dandy who is involved with the wife of another nobleman, not worthy of a pure spirit like Umeko."

"Would he have killed her to be free of her?"

"He didn't. You saw her." His voice broke, and his face contorted. Dropping his head, he wept silently.

It seemed very dark. The sky had clouded up, obscuring the stars. Suddenly the dark clouds parted, their outlines silvered by a hazy moon as it swam into view. The cherry tree sprang into a ghostly presence. "Thank you, Akimitsu," Akitada said with a sigh. "Don't do anything foolish!" The young man shook his head, then quietly turned and disappeared into the shadows.

Akitada looked at the moon for a while, then rose to make another search of Lady Umeko's chamber. She was always writing, the maid had said. Surely she had confided her secrets to a diary and hidden it most carefully.

This time he went over every-

thing in the room, lifting the edges of the grass mats, feeling the panels that formed the walls, pulling the small drawers from her make-up box to look for false bottoms, and even climbing on a stool to run his hands along the wooden cross-beams. Nothing. And yet he was convinced that she had hidden it in this room, and in such a way that it was readily accessible to her. He glanced at the slight figure on the mat. She was small and fragile and would hardly be able to reach the beams or lift heavy boards. He let his eyes scan the walls again. When they reached the doors to the verandah, he noticed the decorative panels that had been inserted around the frame. Through these grilles of narrow, lacquered, bamboo pieces one could easily slip a thin book. He went to inspect them. The vertical panels were useless as hiding places, for the doors slid into them; but those above the doors covered open space. He slid his fingers along the lowest bamboo slat and touched fabric. Coaxed out from its hiding place, the object proved to be a sheaf of papers, sewn together down its middle into a red brocade cover. Lady Umeko's diary.

The smell of blood still hung cloyingly in the air, and Akitada carried the candle to the verandah to read by its flickering light what Lady Umeko had not dared confide to anyone.

He skimmed the artless entries, begun at the home of her maternal grandparents and kept up at greater length since her arrival here. The brushstrokes were unformed, the style artless. Lonely and es-

tranged in this new place, she yearned for her father's affection.

Akitada skipped until he encountered Akimitsu's name. She seemed to have regarded him as a friend, someone her own age she could talk to. She had copied down every poem he had sent her along with her own rather clumsy replies.

Impatient, Akitada turned the pages to more recent entries. In spite of her fondness for Akimitsu, she seemed to have accepted the betrothal to Masanobu to please her father. Umeko might have been unhappy, but she had certainly not been suicidal. In fact, she expressed the hope that she might be married soon and leave for her husband's home.

Then what had she been afraid of? Akitada went back through the diary. Shortly after her arrival and before Akimitsu entered her world, he suddenly encountered the entry: "He came to my room tonight, smelling disgustingly of wine. He was very affectionate, and I wished my father were as fond of me. But then he frightened me with strange talk. I cried out when he touched my breast, and he left."

Akitada raised his head and listened. From beyond the fence to his right came a faint sound. Then a small branch snapped, and someone whispered. Akitada jumped up and cast a frantic look around; it took only a moment to shove the diary under an edge of the grass mat and return to the verandah. He looked for a place to hide. Too late!

Kiyowara's voice demanded, "Who is there?" Akitada froze as the dark figure detached itself from

the gate. In the light of the flickering candle, Akitada stood on the verandah like a thief about to take flight.

"Sugawara! What is going on here?" Kiyowara growled.

"Ah . . ." stammered Akitada.

More people arrived. Someone lit a lantern: Kose senior. Masanobu stepped forward into the light. "Well? What *are* you doing here, Sugawara?" he asked nastily. "Surely you did not lose your way?"

Akitada pulled himself together and bowed to Kiyowara. "No, my lord. I . . . thought it safer to stay here. To wait for the police."

"The police?" Kose Senior demanded, his voice heavy with disbelief.

"Yes. You see, I . . . I am afraid Lady Umeko did not kill herself. She was m-murdered."

Kiyowara was momentarily speechless, then approached angrily. "What nonsense is this, Sugawara? There is the razor in her hand." He pointed at his daughter's body. "In fact, you showed it to me yourself. What do you mean by making up such a thing now?"

Akitada looked at the Koses, wondering if one of them were the killer. He said, "Nevertheless, it was murder. You will have to send for the police, sir."

"I will not! The village warden has been notified. He will certify suicide. And I forbid you to continue this outrageous abuse of my hospitality. You had better return to your room."

Akitada flinched. If it turned out that he was wrong, he would be in the most serious trouble.

"As her father, sir, you must wish to see her murderer caught."

The elder Kose snapped, "You are overstepping the bounds of good manners, young man. I suggest you do as you are told. You have no business here."

"Precisely." Masanobu eyed Akitada as if he had suddenly turned into a disgusting and dangerous insect. "I think he should be sent back immediately, Father," he said. "With a sharp warning. A scandal will hurt my career. With this talk of murder, people will make up all sorts of tales."

Kiyowara Tadahira staggered toward them. He hiccupped, and raised a cup. "Poor li'l Umeko. Le's say a prayer." He stumbled on the steps and fell. Akitada moved to help him up.

His brother snapped, "Leave him alone." He clapped his hands for a servant and told the man, "Put him to bed, and this time stay with him." The servant hefted the mumbly, weak-kneed Tadahira to his feet and supported him out of the courtyard with expertise born from practice.

Lord Kiyowara shook his head, then turned to Akitada. "I am sorry, young man," he said in a softer tone. "I should not have spoken to you that way. It has been a terrible day, and we are all overwrought. The warden and his men will be here soon. It is late, and you will wish to return to the capital early tomorrow. I regret that you should have become involved in my daughter's death."

Akitada bit his lip. "Since I was one of your guests when your

daughter died, sir, the police will want to talk to me. Your daughter had not been dead long when we found her. They will ask all of us where we were when the crime was committed."

Lord Kose flared up, "Just what are you implying, Sugawara? We were together at the time."

"I believe each of us left the banquet briefly. They will verify your stories."

"Our *stories*?" demanded Lord Kose, turning purple with rage. "Lies, do you mean? Something we have made up to cover a murderous impulse? Are you mad, Sugawara?"

Akitada was saved from answering by the arrival of the local warden, but the moment he saw the man, a local farmer, fall down on his knees to Kiyowara, Akitada's heart sank.

Gesturing towards his daughter's corpse, Kiyowara told the warden, "Do your duty, man, but honor my poor child's body."

The warden looked, blanched, then nodded vigorously and approached the corpse. He stopped at a safe distance and peered.

Akitada fidgeted. The man had not even bothered to take a light. Gathering his courage, Akitada protested, "We need a more experienced investigator, my lord. This man may destroy evidence with his fumbling." For good measure, he added, "As a representative of the Ministry of Justice, I cannot approve of such a slipshod investigation."

The warden froze and cast a frightened glance at Kiyowara, who signed and said, "Go on, warden!



All you have to do is verify that she committed suicide."

The warden bowed. He walked around the body slowly, studying it, shaking his head and muttering "*Amida!*" and "What a thing!" Finally he bent to look at the razor in Lady Umeko's hand and asked, "Honorable Lord, was the young lady accustomed to doing most things with her right hand?"

"Certainly."

"Ah. I thought so." The man nodded. "Yes. Yes. In that case it is quite clear that the young lady must have done it herself, for she is still holding the razor in her right hand."

Akitada cried, "The razor could have been put there by her murderer."

The warden goggled at him. "Murderer?" He looked again, and said, "Yes. Yes. You are quite right, noble sir; it could have been put there by her murderer."

"You fool," Kiyowara groaned. "It's a clear case of suicide. My daughter was unhappy about her approaching marriage. She was highly strung and afraid to leave her home and family. Perhaps she left a note. Search her!"

Akitada protested, in vain. The warden approached the body again and timidly felt the girl's sleeves.

"She usually carried things in her sash," Kiyowara said impatiently.

The sash was soaked with blood, and the warden visibly flinched. His function as local representative of the law had evidently not inured him to the taboos against touching the dead.

With an impatient grunt, Kiyowara pushed the warden aside and, carefully tucking aside his sleeve, bent to retrieve something from his daughter's sash. "Here," he said, holding up a square of paper smeared with blood.

The warden shrank back even farther. "I can't read, my lord. You read it. What does it say?"

"Very well." Kiyowara unfolded the paper and read out: "My heart, cast down by harsh fate, shatters like the blossoms." Sighing deeply he refolded the note. "It is as I thought. Her unhappiness has caused her to end her life."

There was something familiar about the words. Akitada extended his hand. "May I?" Kiyowara relinquished the paper. Akitada read the note. The writing was not hers, but he recognized the line. It was Akimitsu's, and he must have given her this. Returning the paper, he said only, "This note does not speak of death specifically, only of unhappiness. I regret this deeply, my lord, but I should like everyone to verify a small detail. There is a comb on Lady Umeko's mirror. Would you please look at it?"

Lord Kiyowara glanced at it. "What about it? Young Kose gave it to her earlier. She was combing her hair with it before she . . ." He turned away and covered his face.

"There is a great deal of blood on the mirror, but none on the comb," Akitada persisted.

The warden stepped closer and looked. The Koses muttered together.

Still hiding his face, Kiyowara cried out in a pained voice, "*Amida!*"

What next? There is blood on the front of her gown, but none on the back. Who is to say at such a moment what will get stained?"

"There usually is a reason for things."

"Sugawara," said his host in a tired voice, "will you please leave and let the man get on with his duty? I am at the end of my patience."

Masanobu stepped up to the verandah and laid his hand on Akitada's elbow. "Time to go," he said through gritted teeth. "You've outstayed your welcome."

Akitada shook off his hand. "My point about the comb is that it cannot have been lying on the mirror when Lady Umeko died or it would be covered by her blood. This kind of fatal wound causes the blood to spurt. Someone put the comb there after her death."

Silence. Then the warden nodded, "Yes, yes, quite right! That must be so. Someone came in later and put it there. Perhaps the person who found her?"

"Nonsense," snapped Kiyowara. The warden jumped a little. His expression turned glum.

"The maid denies going near her," said Akitada, "and if anyone else had been here, he or she would have given the alarm. No, it is not likely that anyone set foot in this room after the murderer until the maid arrived."

Kiyowara groaned again. "Now I remember what Soga told me about you. You look for murder in everything. There is a perfectly simple explanation. Both you and I entered the room. One of us accidentally kicked the comb."

The warden chuckled with relief. "Yes, yes!" he cried. "Very good! That explains it perfectly."

Akitada cleared his throat. "I'm afraid not. You, my lord, never went near the body, and I was careful. No, I am afraid the comb was where it is now. In any case, I think there is sufficient cause for calling in the metropolitan police." Seeing Kiyowara's lips tighten, he added, "They will make a thorough search for other notes, or perhaps a diary, which may throw additional light on Lady Umeko's frame of mind."

The warden whose face had fallen at Akitada's objection, brightened instantly. "Yes, yes. The metropolitan police! What I was thinking exactly. I said to myself, 'You must call in the metropolitan police.' Yes. Yes."

Kiyowara threw up his hands. "Have it your way! I shall deal with matters in the morning."

Akitada turned to the warden. "Can you spare someone to guard this room until the police arrive?"

"Guard the room?" began the warden. Kose Senior interrupted. "This is an unbearable insult to your host and to myself and my son, Sugawara," he snapped. "We shall not forget it." He took his son's arm and stalked off.

The warden moved uncomfortably from one foot to the other. "Do you mean someone has to stay with the dead lady?"

Akitada sighed. Most people feared contamination by the dead, and country people also believed in possession by their spirits. "Very well," he said. "I shall keep watch myself."

"No." Kiyowara's tone was peremptory. "Seal the door, warden, by pasting some paper over it. No one will enter. Goodnight to you, Sugawara!" He swung around and walked quickly away. The warden obeyed as Akitada watched, then said apologetically, "With your permission, sir. I must dictate my report and send a messenger to the capital."

Akitada walked back to his room, his mind in turmoil. The darkness was now dense, and there was a hint of coming rain in the light wind that had sprung up. He glanced up at the sky. Clouds had moved in, black rags blotting out the stars and moon.

There was something very strange about this murder, and murder it was, no matter what Kiyowara said. At least the warden's habit of agreeing with any person of higher rank had allowed Akitada to prevail about the police. Tomorrow, by daylight, the efficient constables of the metropolitan force would search Lady Umeko's room and interrogate every person in the household. They would find the diary, put the pieces together, and see the pattern—of anger, passion, or greed—that had led to this violent act.

But Akitada found that sleep escaped him. Half-remembered bits and pieces kept worrying him.

He went over each of the possible suspects again. Akimitsu, by his own admission her lover, had two strong motives. He seemed gentle and harmless, but the tutor was a bit of an exhibitionist and could

have put on an act. And she had still had his last poem on her when she died. Proof that he had visited her?

Kose Masanobu had opposed the match from the start, possibly because of another strong attachment. If he had discovered Lady Umeko's affair, he might have lashed out in fury. Masanobu, unlike Akimitsu, struck Akitada as a man with a violent temper.

His father's motive was less strong, but he also might have avenged an insult to his family.

Surely it had not been Tadahira, a drunk, and a loving uncle more distraught over Lady Umeko's death than her father.

Akitada sat up.

A loving uncle? Or a drunken sot bent on seduction? It was Tadahira who had forced his caresses on her. Lady Umeko's reference to her unwelcome visitor's drunkenness and her pathetic wish that her father, instead of this man, would show her more affection made it a virtual certainty. Poor lonely Lady Umeko.

The shutters rattled in a gust of chill wind; Akitada shivered and rose to step outside. It was almost dawn. The clouds above the mountain range were turning a tarnished silver, and the first drops of cold rain struck the verandah.

He stood there for a moment, rubbing his arms to warm himself, and glanced at the gradually brightening cherry trees in the grey, rain-spattering dusk.

In the dismal weather the mountain peaks towered like angry gods over the shadowy earth, and smoky

clouds moved before the cold wind that shook the trees, tearing at their fragile springtime beauty and scattering blossoms across the rain dark earth.

And suddenly, with utter certainty, Akitada knew what must have happened. As she knelt before her silver mirror, Lady Umeko had seen her murderer's image and had been as defenseless as the cherry trees before his fury.

The police officer was no stranger to Akitada. A lieutenant by rank and an ex-soldier, the grey-haired Ishida was a thorough professional who frowned on junior legal clerks meddling in criminal cases. To Akitada's relief, he did not acknowledge their acquaintance.

While the police examined the body, they were herded into the banquet room, where some of the remnants of yesterday's celebration still lay about. Under the watchful eyes of two constables, no one felt like chatting. Lord Kiyowara had withdrawn into his own wretched thoughts, his brother looked ill, and the Koses apparently still simmered with resentment. Akimitsu, pale and silent, sat by himself near the door. Akitada bowed in the direction of the noblemen and was ignored. With a sigh he sat down beside the tutor.

Outside in the ruined garden the wind and rain scattered blossoms like snow across the sodden ground, but today no one intoned a verse comparing the brevity of cherry blossoms to human life.

They did not have long to wait. Lieutenant Ishida entered briskly,

accompanied by more equally businesslike constables. After a glance around, he addressed Kiyowara.

"I have some questions for those who were here last night, my lord. Since Sugawara is the only outsider, perhaps I'd better start with him."

Lord Kose growled, "You should be warned, lieutenant, that Sugawara has some insane fixation about one of us having murdered the young woman. His behavior has been shocking. I have every intention of speaking to his superiors."

The lieutenant raised his brows, looked at Akitada, and asked, "What gave you such an extraordinary idea, Sugawara?"

"It was the comb, sir."

He explained about the clean comb on the bloody mirror. Kiyowara immediately offered his own explanation. Ishida listened to both versions without comment.

Increasingly nervous, Akitada told of his activities during the night. When he came to the part where he found the diary, Kiyowara spoke up again.

"Pure fabrication. My daughter never kept a diary. Her education had been neglected to the extent that she could barely read and write. That is why she had a tutor. There never was a diary. Sugawara must have dreamed it."

A soft voice said suddenly, "But there *was* a diary. I recommended that she keep one for practice."

They all looked at the tutor. Akimitsu saw Kiyowara's glowering expression and bit his lip. "I am sorry, my lord, but she showed it to

me once to ask about a poem she had written in it."

"Don't be ridiculous. It must have been something else," snapped Kiyowara. "I do think you are singularly lacking in loyalty, Akimitsu."

The tutor paled and shrank into himself. Ishida asked him, "Did you read any other entries?" Akimitsu shook his head wordlessly. "And you?" Ishida asked Akitada. "How much did you read before you were interrupted?"

"Enough to know it was a diary. I started at the beginning and had reached a passage where she expressed fear of some unnamed man who had come to her room at night and attempted to seduce her."

"What?" Kiyowara was on his feet now, his face red with fury. "How dare you make such a shocking suggestion."

"Please sit down, my lord," Ishida told him. "You will get your turn in a moment."

Akitada said anxiously, "If you will send one of your men to her room, the matter can be cleared up quickly. I hid the diary under the edge of the mat near the verandah door."

"There was no diary in Lady Umeko's room. We looked under all the grass mats."

Akitada stared at Ishida. "Then someone found it. You must search everyone's room immediately. It's a slim volume of some rather nice mulberry paper sewn together in a red brocade cover. The handwriting is childish but perfectly adequate."

"I do not need instruction in my

job," the lieutenant snapped. "As it happens, I have ordered such a search." He paused and let his eyes move over the group. "It turned up in some fragments among the ashes of one of the braziers in the guest quarters." He drew a sheet of paper from his sash and unfolded it. In it lay a bit of charred red brocade. The paper was browned at the edges but covered with writing. Holding both paper and brocade up for them to see, he asked Akitada and Akimitsu, "Does either of you recognize this?"

Akimitsu nodded nervously. Akitada could not read the words, but there was no doubt in his mind that Ishida had found the diary. "Yes," he said. "Is that all that is left of the diary? May I look at it more closely?"

Ishida refolded the fragment and tucked it away. "Later. As to what is left, let's just say someone was careless. Thank you, you have both been helpful. Please remain for the time being." Turning to Lord Kiyowara, Ishida said, "My lord, it is my duty to confirm that the death of your daughter was indeed murder and that there is evidence of a forbidden sexual relationship in the remnants of her diary. It is my belief that the murderer attempted to destroy this evidence before we arrived."

Kiyowara demanded, "Let me see what you found."

Ishida bowed. "Forgive me, my lord, but there is no point. You have already stated that your daughter could barely write and will hardly be able to identify the sample."

Kiyowara snapped, "I still deny the existence of such a diary. I do

not know what you found, but it did not belong to my daughter. She was illiterate."

Akimitsu cried, "No, my lord," then blushed and cleared his throat apologetically. "Lady Umeko was far from illiterate. It grieves me that you have so little confidence in your daughter, who was a beautiful, gentle, and loving young woman. She could both read and write very well before she died, and she showed considerable talent for poetry."

Suddenly Masanobu was on his feet, eyes blazing. "According to the lieutenant, there was a forbidden sexual relationship between my future wife and some man. Was this . . . this mere hiring the person who dishonored her?"

Akimitsu turned perfectly white. "No. Never. I swear it by my ancestors."

Kose Senior pulled Masanobu down, whispering something in his ear. His son subsided with a frown.

The lieutenant regarded the Koses thoughtfully for a moment, then turned back to Kiyowara Toyashi. "So it seems that the page I found was indeed written by your daughter. Fortunately, we have enough evidence to bring charges. I regret to inform you that it was your brother who . . ."

"No!" Tadahira covered his ears, and burst into loud moans, "No. Oh no! No."

Ishida raised his voice a little. "Kiyowara Tadahira, I arrest you in the name of the emperor." He gestured to his constables. Two of them approached and began to unwind thin chains from around their

waists. Kiyowara Toyashi rose and stepped in front of his brother.

"Lieutenant, I do not understand any of this. There must be a mistake. But even if you have proof, you cannot put chains on my brother as if he were a common criminal. We are descendants of the third emperor. Do you truly have grounds for such an arrest? If you have been influenced by the mad charges of that young puppy Sugawara, I'll have both of you tried for slander."

"Imperial blood or not, my lord, it looks very much like your brother raped your daughter," Ishida said brutally. "Yesterday he tried to repeat the assault, only this time she objected and he . . ."

"No!" cried Akitada, as shocked as Kiyowara by the lieutenant's charge. "That's not what happened."

Ishida shot him a furious glance and snapped, "May I remind you, Sugawara, that you will be mentioned in my report to Minister Soga?"

"The whole charge is a foul lie," insisted Lord Kiyowara. "No judge would take a silly girl's overheated imagination as evidence against my brother, whose only motive for a few harmless visits was a natural affection for a lonely young girl. Young women fill their diaries with all sorts of foolish notions. I will not tolerate your spreading such scandal about members of my family."

The lieutenant smiled coldly. "So you now admit the existence of the diary, my lord?"

Tadahira had become calm except for tears streaming down his



face. He looked at his brother. "It's no use, Toyashi. She . . ."

Kiyowara turned. "Say no more! They will use your words against you. I shall have you released as soon as possible."

But Tadahira shook his head.

"No, it's too late, Toyashi." He looked at the lieutenant. "You were quite right about my misconduct with my niece. The first time I simply mistook the room. She was so sweet and innocent. Too sweet and gentle for the rude hands of that young rake Masanobu, I thought. She had no mother, and my brother had no time for her. I only meant to prepare her a little, but the wine . . . one night I went too far. Poor child!" He wept in slow, gulping sobs that shook his whole body.

A flash of fury passed over his brother's face. "You've lost your mind!" he said disgustedly.

The Koses had listened with increasing anger. Now the elder Kose exploded. "This is an outrage!" He got up and faced Kiyowara. "How dare you involve my family in such shameful doings? I should have suspected your haste to marry the girl off to my son, but I thought you were desperate for money." He turned to Ishida. "Kiyowara misused funds in his office and was about to be found out. He approached me for a loan, offering his daughter and a captaincy in the imperial guards to my son. I accepted. Fortunately, events have prevented the disastrous connection before it was too late, but we shall not remain under his roof for another moment. With your permission, my son and I will return to

the capital. You may call on us at any time for our testimony."

When Ishida nodded, Masanobu joined his father. On their way out, they paused before Akitada, who rose quickly to his feet and bowed.

"We are indebted to you, young man," Kose Senior said. "If it had not been for your insistence that the young woman was murdered, I would have extended the loan against Kiyowara's promise of the appointment for my son. We would have looked fine fools. I hope you will accept our apologies and call on us for future assistance." Father and son bowed and walked stiffly away through the drizzle outside.

Struck with astonishment, Akitada was still looking after them when Tadahira cried, "Don't try to protect me any longer, Toyashi. I have ruined everything."

Kiyowara lunged at his brother and would have struck him if Ishida had not separated them. Two constables seized Tadahira and pulled him toward the door.

In a sudden panic Akitada jumped up and barred their way. "Lieutenant," he cried, his heart pounding, "you're making a mistake."

"Stay out of this, Sugawara," Ishida warned.

"Just one question, lieutenant, please. Are you arresting Kiyowara Tadahira because you think he burned the diary?"

"Since we found what is left of it in his brazier, it stands to reason he committed the murder."

Tadahira gasped. "You think I murdered the poor child?"

His voice unsteady with nervous-

ness, Akitada turned to Lord Kiyowara, "How did you know what your daughter wrote in her diary?"

Kiyowara stared at him blankly. "What?"

"You just said that she suffered from an overheated imagination and that girls write foolish notions in their diaries. That means you read what she wrote. You also referred to a few visits your brother made to her room. How could you have known that if not from her diary? It was you who took the diary, wasn't it? And you who tried to burn it in your brother's room."

"That is an outrageous lie. I repeat, there is no diary."

Tadahira struggled with the constables. "But that's not true. You came to me and told me that you knew all. You said you would destroy her diary to protect me." His eyes widened in sudden horror. "Oh, say you did not kill your own child to protect me!"

"Of course not! Stop ranting before you destroy us both." Kiyowara's features were distorted with rage.

Akitada could not restrain himself any longer. "Lord Kiyowara, you *did* kill your daughter," he said. "It had to be you. She would not have remained calmly at her toilet in front of the mirror if your brother had visited her. Only her father could have come close enough to her to reach for the razor and slit her throat."

Tadahira became hysterical. "Dear heaven! It is true. I heard you in her room last evening. I wanted to speak to her, to apologize and wish her well, but when I

got to the door, I heard you shouting. I was afraid you had found out what had happened. Oh dear heaven, why did you do this?"

Kiyowara stood frozen. For a moment he looked murderous, then the fight went out of him. He sank to the floor. "You fool!" he muttered. "I tried to cover for you, and you have ruined me. You miserable drunkard! Yes, I found out. Not only did you sleep with my daughter, but you got her with child. When I went to inform her that the marriage contracts were signed, the silly girl told me. She wanted me to tell Masanobu. When I refused, she threatened to tell him herself. You know I could not allow that."

Akimitsu gave a choking cry and jumped up. Looking at the Kiyowaras, he cried, "She would have done better to clutch a stone and leap into a deep pool than to come here, hoping for a father's love. Only lust, cruelty, and death reside in the hearts of the great." He turned and plunged into the rain outside.

A chilling silence fell in the banquet room. Kiyowara Toyashi sat, his head in his hands, and Kiyowara Tadahira stared down at him in horror. "Monstrous!" he whispered. "To kill your own daughter and my unborn child! But why, Toyashi, why did you burn the diary in my room?"

Kiyowara muttered, "There was no brazier in mine."

Tadahira heaved a deep sigh, then sagged to the floor beside his brother and wept.

Later, after the Kiyowaras had signed confessions and been taken

away, Ishida and Akitada walked through the garden towards the stables. The rain still misted steadily, and from the dripping trees fell showers of wet petals. Akitada was filled with sadness. Frail as the cherry blossoms had been Lady Umeko's chance at happiness, brief as their season her place in her father's house, and cruel as the rain-storm his rage when she proved a liability rather than an asset.

Compared to such tragedy, his own troubles seemed trivial, and he hesitated before he spoke. "It was very lucky," he finally said shyly, "that enough of the diary remained. Otherwise it would have gone hard with me for meddling again. There was only my word against Kiyowara's, and he is a good friend of my superior."

"Hmm," said Ishida, glancing up at the denuded branches. "Actually there was just that page with some lines of bad poetry."

Akitada stopped. "But," he stammered, "but you said . . ."

Ishida regarded him quizzically. "You have good instincts, Sugawara, but you are still very young. It is much better to let a fish swim into the net than to throw stones at him."

"Oh," Akitada flushed and hung his head. "I suppose you will report to the minister . . ."

"That you have been most helpful and cooperative. You have, you know." Ishida smiled a little and put his hand on Akitada's shoulder. "Come along, son. I'm an old man, but we've both had enough of cherry blossoms, I think."

## SOLUTION TO THE MAY "UNSOLVED":

Hal Quimby murdered Elvira North on the third floor.

| FLOOR | COUPLE                 | CITY    |
|-------|------------------------|---------|
| 12    | Don and Clara Parker   | Queens  |
| 11    | Ben and Gilda Unser    | Salem   |
| 10    | Hal and Idella Quimby  | Miami   |
| 9     |                        |         |
| 8     | Ivan and Beth Melton   | Raleigh |
| 7     | Abe and Hilda Smith    | Omaha   |
| 6     | Elmo and Donna O'Hara  | Tampa   |
| 5     | Detective Justin Case  |         |
| 4     | Frank and Alice Tuttle | Norwich |
| 3     | Carl and Elvira North  | Utica   |
| 2     | Greg and Flora Randall | Peoria  |

MYSTERY CLASSIC

# The Exiles' Club

Lord Dunsany



**I**t was an evening party, and something someone had said to me had started me talking about a subject that to me is full of fascination, the subject of old religions, forsaken gods. The truth (for all religions have some of it), the wisdom, the beauty, of the religions of countries to which I travel have not the same appeal to me, for one only notices in them their tyranny and intolerance and the abject servitude that they claim from thought, but when a dynasty has been dethroned in heaven and goes forgotten and outcast even among men, one's eyes no longer dazzled by its power find something very wistful in the faces of fallen gods suppliant to be remembered, something almost tearfully beautiful, like a long warm summer twilight fading gently away after some day memorable in the story of earthly wars. Between what Zeus, for instance, had been once and the half-remembered tale he is today there lies a space so great that there is no change of fortune known to man whereby we may measure the height down which he has fallen. And it is the same with many another god at whom once the ages trembled and the twentieth century treats as an old wives' tale. The fortitude that such a fall demands is surely more than human.

Some such things as these I was saying, and being upon a subject that much attracts me I possibly spoke too loudly; certainly I was not aware that standing close behind me was no less a person than the ex-King of Eritivaria, the thirty islands of the East, or I would have moderated my voice and moved away a little to give him more room. I was not aware of his presence until his satellite, one who had fallen with him into exile but still revolved about him, told me that his master desired to know me, and so to my surprise I was presented, though neither of them even knew my name. And that was how I came to be invited by the ex-king to dine at his club.

At the time I could only account for his wishing to know me by supposing that he found in his own exiled condition some likeness to the fallen fortunes of the gods of whom I talked unwitting of his presence, but now I know that it was not of himself he was thinking when he asked me to dine at that club.

The club would have been the most imposing building in any street in London, but in that obscure, mean quarter of London in which they had built it it appeared unduly enormous. Lifting right up above those grotesque houses and built in that Greek style that we call Georgian, there was something Olympian about it. To my host an unfashionable street could have meant nothing; through all his youth, wherever he had gone had become fashionable the moment he went there; words like the East End could have had no meaning to him.

Whoever built that house had enormous wealth and cared nothing for fashion, perhaps despised it. As I stood gazing at the magnificent upper windows draped with great curtains, indistinct in the evening,

*From Tales of Wonder, Elkin Mathews, 1916*

on which huge shadows flickered, my host attracted my attention from the doorway, and so I went in and met for the second time the ex-King of Eritivaria.

In front of us a stairway of rare marble led upwards; he took me through a side door and downstairs, and we came to a banqueting hall of great magnificence. A long table ran up the middle of it, laid for quite twenty people, and I noticed the peculiarity that instead of chairs there were thrones for everyone except me, who was the only guest and for whom there was an ordinary chair. My host explained to me when we all sat down that everyone who belonged to that club was by rights a king.

In fact none was permitted, he told me, to belong to the club unless his claim to a kingdom made out in writing had been examined and allowed by those whose duty it was. The whim of a populace or the candidate's own misrule were never considered by the investigators; nothing counted with them but heredity and lawful descent from kings, all else was ignored. At that table there were those who had once reigned themselves; others lawfully claimed descent from kings that the world had forgotten; the kingdoms claimed by some had even changed their names. Hatzgurh, the mountain kingdom, is almost regarded as mythical.

I have seldom seen greater splendour than that long hall provided below the level of the street. No doubt by day it was a little sombre, as all basements are, but at night with its great crystal chandeliers, and the glitter of heirlooms that had gone into exile, it surpassed the splendour of palaces that have only one king. They had come to London suddenly, most of those kings, or their fathers before them, or forefathers; some had come away from their kingdoms by night, in a light sleigh, flogging the horses, or had galloped clear with morning over the border; some had trudged roads for days from their capital in disguise, yet many had had time just as they left to snatch up some small thing without price in markets, for the sake of old times as they said but quite as much, I thought, with an eye to the future. And there these treasures glittered on that long table in the banqueting hall of the basement of that strange club. Merely to see them was much, but to hear their story that their owners told was to go back in fancy to epic times on the romantic border of fable and fact, where the heroes of history fought with the gods of myth. The famous silver horses of Gilgianza were there, climbing their sheer mountain, which they did by miraculous means before the time of the Goths. It was not a large piece of silver, but its workmanship outrivalled the skill of the bees.

A yellow emperor had brought out of the East a piece of that incomparable porcelain that had made his dynasty famous though all their deeds are forgotten; it had the exact shade of the right purple.



And there was a little golden statuette of a dragon stealing a diamond from a lady; the dragon had the diamond in his claws, large and of the first water. There had been a kingdom whose whole constitution and history were founded on the legend, from which alone its kings had claimed their right to the sceptre, that a dragon stole a diamond from a lady. When its last king left that country because his favourite general used a peculiar formation under the fire of artillery, he brought with him the little ancient image that no longer proved him a king outside that singular club.

There was the pair of amethyst cups of the turbaned King of Foo, the one that he drank from himself and the one that he gave to his enemies, eye could not tell which was which.

All these things the ex-King of Eritivaria showed me, telling me a marvellous tale of each; of his own he had brought nothing except the mascot that used once to sit on the top of the water tube of his favourite motor.

I have not outlined a tenth of the splendour of that table, I had meant to come again and examine each piece of plate and make notes of its history; had I known that this was the last time I should wish to enter that club I should have looked at its treasures more attentively, but now as the wine went round and the exiles began to talk I took my eyes from the table and listened to strange tales of their former state.

He that has seen better times has usually a poor tale to tell, some mean and trivial thing that has been his undoing, but they that dined in that basement had mostly fallen like oaks on nights of abnormal tempest, had fallen mightily and shaken a nation. Those who had not been kings themselves but claimed through an exiled ancestor, had stories to tell of even grander disaster, history seeming to have mellowed their dynasty's fate as moss grows over an oak a great while fallen. There were no jealousies there as so often there are among kings; rivalry must have ceased with the loss of their navies and armies, and they showed no bitterness against those that had turned them out, one speaking of the error of his prime minister by which he had lost his throne as "poor old Friedrich's heaven-sent gift of tactlessness."

They gossiped pleasantly of many things, the tittle-tattle we all had to know when we were learning history, and many a wonderful story I might have heard, many a sidelight on mysterious wars, had I not made use of one unfortunate word. That word was "upstairs."

The ex-King of Eritivaria having pointed out to me those unparalleled heirlooms to which I have alluded, and many more besides, hospitably asked me if there was anything else that I would care to see; he meant the pieces of plate that they had in the cupboards, the curiously graven swords of other princes, historic jewels, legendary seals, but I who had had a glimpse of their marvelous staircase, whose balustrade

I believed to be solid gold, and wondering why in such a stately house they chose to dine in the basement, mentioned the word "upstairs." A profound hush came down on the whole assembly, the hush that might greet levity in a cathedral.

"Upstairs!" he gasped. "We cannot go upstairs."

I perceived that what I had said was an ill-chosen thing. I tried to excuse myself but knew not how.

"Of course," I muttered, "members may not take guests upstairs."

"Members!" he said to me, "We are not the members!"

There was such reproof in his voice that I said no more, I looked at him questioningly, perhaps my lips moved, I may have said, "What are you?" A great surprise had come on me at their attitude.

"We are the waiters," he said.

That I could not have known, here at least was honest ignorance that I had no need to be ashamed of, the very opulence of their table denied it.

"Then who are the members?" I asked.

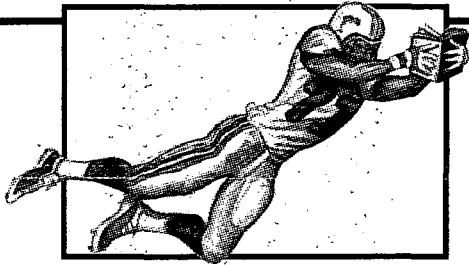
Such a hush fell at that question, such a hush of genuine awe, that all of a sudden a wild thought entered my head, a thought strange and fantastic and terrible. I gripped my host by the wrist and hushed my voice.

"Are they too exiles?" I asked.

Twice as he looked in my face he gravely nodded his head. I left that club very swiftly indeed, never to see it again, scarcely pausing to say farewell to those menial kings, and as I left the door a great window opened far up at the top of the house and a flash of lightning streamed from it and killed a dog.

# BOOKED & PRINTED

Mary Cannon



**C**aleb Carr is known to mystery fans for his bestselling historical mystery, *The Alienist*. His latest in paperback is more science fiction than mystery, but that doesn't make **Killing Time** (Warner, \$7.99) any less fascinating. It's the year 2023 when Dr. Gideon Wolfe, a criminal psychiatrist, opens his investigation into the assassination of a motion picture special effects wizard at the request of the man's terrified widow. Before long Wolfe has dragged an old and close friend, a private investigator, into the case; all too soon thereafter comes death, abduction, and Wolfe's introduction to a brilliant and dedicated group of . . . well, I won't give away the surprise here. Look for some cool techno gadgets and a couple of great getaway scenes. If you are good at suspending your disbelief and enjoy exploring the possibilities for crime in the future, you'll appreciate the trademark attention to detail that Carr brings to the experience.

If you're looking for bright, breezy, and fast-paced, look no further than Beth Saulnier's newest, **Bad Seed** (Warner, \$23.95). This is the latest in the adventures of Alex Bernier, star reporter for the newspaper in the college town where she went to school. This time around Alex is covering a science story for her colleague and drinking buddy Jake. Her coverage includes the demonstrators outside a conference at the university; that's when the inflammatory rhetoric blows up more than hot air, and life becomes crazy. Jake's latest binge has plunged him off the deep end, her policeman boyfriend has been banned from her company by the FBI, and Alex buries herself deeper into trouble as she digs for the real story behind the controversy surrounding the university's research into genetically engineered food crops. It's a pleasure exploring this interesting topic as we look over the irrepressible Alex's shoulder.

By contrast, Iris Johansen's continuing series featuring forensic sculptor Eve Duncan is nail-biting, psychologically complex, and grim-

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# THE STORY THAT WON

The January Mysterious Photograph contest was won by Rick Noetzel of Duluth, Georgia. Honorable mentions go to John J. Owens of Greenville, South Carolina; Art Cosing of Fairfax, Virginia; E. D. Woods of Wilmington, Massachusetts; Charles Schaeffer of Bethesda, Maryland; Robert Kesling of Ann Arbor, Michigan;



leen P. McGehee of Kingman, Arizona. C. J. DeAngelis of Meriden, Connecticut; J. F. Peirce of Bryan, Texas; Elaine E. Jones of Wilsonville, Oregon; Andrew McAllister of Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada; Ray Chabot of Waterdown, Ontario, Canada; Mike Enso of Buckeye, Arizona; Frances Lowe of Orlando, Florida; and Kath-

Hulton Getty/Tony Stone Images

## GOOD OLD DAYS by Rick Noetzel

The old man leaned against the wall of the chapel. Fog billowed around him, leaving a clammy smear of moisture over his exposed hands and face. In the darkness, he could hear footsteps and the tapping of a cane or umbrella on the pavement. He turned toward the steps and lit his pipe, closing his eyes against the sudden flare of the match.

"The nightingale sings at dawn," muttered the shadowy form standing a few feet away.

"All birds love the light," he replied, blowing a short-lived smoke ring from his mouth. "You have the money, Nikolai?"

The elderly Russian stepped out of the fog and extended an envelope with his right hand. In his left he held a wooden cane, topped with a silver bear. "Da, William, I do."

William took the envelope and rifled through the stack of bills. Satisfied, he handed a paper bag to Nikolai. "As promised. Cigarettes and a bootleg copy of the last two *Sopranos*."

Nikolai took the package and shook his head. "At one time," he said in his soft Russian accent, "it would have been launch codes and troop movements. Now, we smuggle contraband around a nursing home, hoping that the attendants don't catch us."

William nodded and turned to the darkness. "Sometimes, I miss the Cold War." The two men shook hands and departed, each following their separate paths into the fog, two old stallions remembering greener pastures.

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ly serious. **Body of Lies** (Bantam, \$24.95) finds Eve the unwitting instrument in an elaborate scheme perpetrated by a very secret, very wealthy group of international powerbrokers known only as The Cabal. Their right arm is a bayou-grown psychopath who opens the novel by killing his beloved brother. After that, there is nothing this man will not do for The Cabal. The reader watches him manipulate Eve and those she loves most, all to position her so that she will agree to reconstruct the skull of a man purported to be a missing millionaire. If you're new to this series, you'll discover a protagonist of unrelenting intensity—a woman haunted by the violent loss of her child, now driven in her work to help find other missing victims of crime. In her relationships with her adopted daughter, her policeman lover, and her formerly alcoholic mother, Eve is a strong and compassionate character. Johansen's multilayered plot does her leading lady justice.

**The Eyre Affair** by Jasper Fforde (Viking, \$23.95) may also find itself reviewed in *Asimov's Science Fiction*, but many readers will thank me for mentioning it here. True, Fforde's Great Britain in 1985 may not closely resemble the one we knew then, but why cavil? Heroine Thursday Next is a cop, a special op working for the government's literary detection branch. Tracking down militant Baconians, verifying Shakespearean forgeries, and foiling rare manuscript burglars—these are but a few of the capers that have heretofore required Thursday's expertise and outstanding pistol skills. The fact that her father is a renegade cop from the Time Travel force, or that her brilliantly dotty uncle is a pottering scientific genius, that is just icing on the cake. But this time a truly evil genius, a man whom Thursday once called "Professor," kidnaps one of the nation's greatest heroines: none other than Jane Eyre herself. It will take the combined help of her family members and even Edward Rochester himself to assist Thursday in saving the day (and the heroine of one of England's greatest novels).

Short story fans (and you are reading AHMM, after all) should seek out Ian Rankin's latest hardcover, **A Good Hanging** (St. Martin's Minotaur, \$23.95). Fans of Edinburgh Detective Inspector John Rebus won't need any additional urging to spend time with this very human, very smart, and likable cop. If you haven't made your acquaintance with Rankin's protagonist, these tales also provide the opportunity to peek behind the scenes at the Edinburgh theater festival, to squire a visiting French policeman around some tourist venues, and to poke around in one of the old city's many abandoned buildings. It's a bit like armchair traveling with a never-boring tourist guide and a tasty mystery puzzler as an added bonus.

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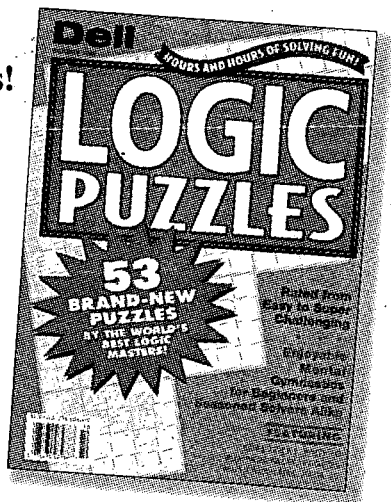


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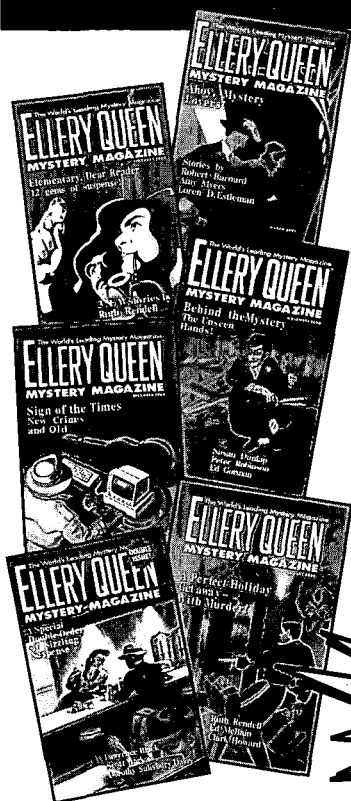
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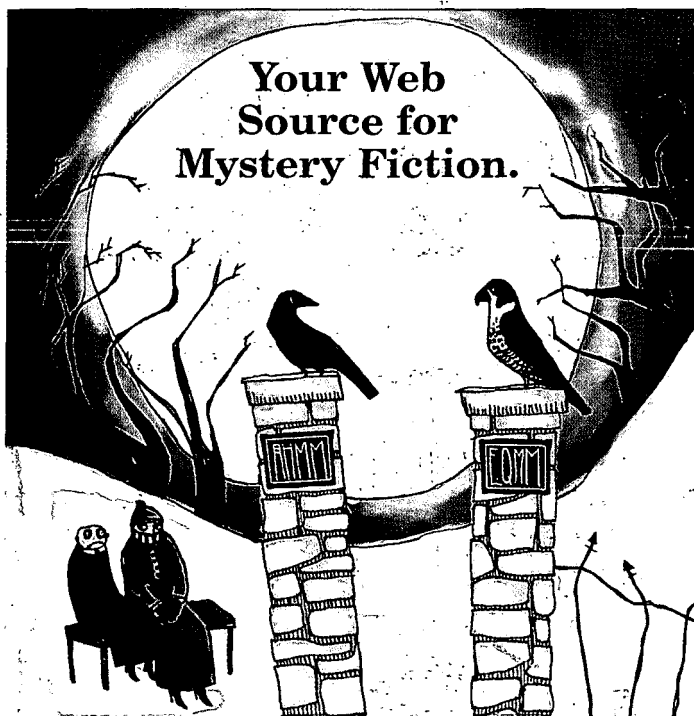
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